

## Event and Process

As I said in the previous chapter, I am less preoccupied with dating a conversion event these days. Instead, I am more focused on being part of an ongoing process. But what do we call that process? And what is that process about?

In my early years as a Christian, I was taught to be event-oriented. There was an event—we variously called it accepting Christ as your personal Savior, getting saved, being born again, becoming a Christian—that was datable and time-able down to the minute, and this event was all-important. It was so important that everything that came after the event was seen as a sort of denouement. The term for it, “follow-up,” suggested it was like cleaning up after a party, less exciting, less important than the focal point. If one could not tell his story (called a “testimony”), giving the precise date and time of one’s conversion event, one’s status as a Christian was suspect.

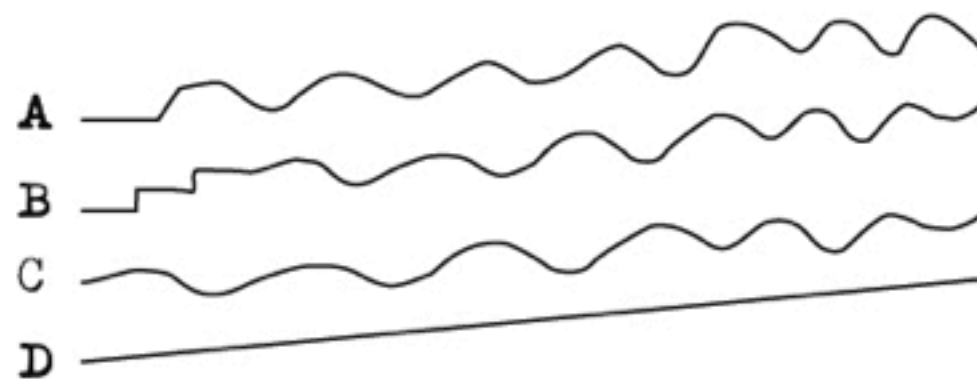
I would probably still see things this way today if it weren’t for a number of experiences and realizations.

In my own experience, I am not sure exactly when my conversion happened. Because I grew up in churches that emphasized “getting saved,” at the end of nearly every sermon I would pray, “God, if I’m not saved yet, let me be saved now. If I wasn’t sincere the last time, I want to be sincere this time.” Which time “took”? I remember as a boy going to a

special children’s service and being especially “sincere” in my prayer for God to forgive my sins and save me. I came home and told my mother that I was now saved, but she tells me that some time before this event, she had noticed that on the back of a plaster plaque hanging on my wall (the kinds of plaques that kids would make in Christian summer camps or vacation Bible schools) that I had written, in pencil, “I know I’m saved.” Although I have no memory of writing on the back of that plaque, it is clear that “crossing the line” was a preoccupation of my boyhood mind, conscience, and imagination. Later, in my teenage years, I had several profound and powerful spiritual experiences that were so transforming that I wondered if any of my childhood prayers had “counted” at all. When was I saved? God knows. I don’t. In college, I remember reading the spiritual autobiography of Jonathan Edwards, the leader of the Second Great Awakening in New England in the eighteenth century. Here was this great Christian leader who recounts a series of spiritual experiences but never identifies one of them as “the one.” That was the first time I wondered if the “one-time event focus” may itself be flawed. Meanwhile, I had become involved with the charismatic movement, and in these more Pentecostal circles, it was clear that one needed not one event, but two. Being “born again” or “saved” was a nice start, but have you been “baptized in the Spirit” or “filled with the Spirit”—have you received the *second* blessing? I realized that I could reinterpret my experience to fit their paradigm (and I later had more spiritual experiences that also could fit their paradigm), and then I began to wonder if people simply interpret a wide range of experiences to fit into the expected formula of the group to which they wish to belong. That thought bothered me and in a way frightened me (I didn’t want the world to get that complicated), but it wouldn’t go away. When I became more involved in church leadership, I participated for a while in something called Evangelism Explosion. This approach to evangelism was focused entirely on bringing people to a conversion event where they acknowledge a certain theory of the atonement and where

they say a certain kind of prayer. I led many people through this prayer and rejoiced that they were “saved.” But this method was flawed: Over time, I noticed that those who said the prayer the first time they were invited to almost never would be seen again in church. On the other hand, those who resisted or argued or just weren’t ready continued coming back to church and asking questions and learning over time. The first group seemed to “get saved” without staying saved, and the second group seemed to stay saved without ever getting saved. These people, whose ongoing growth seemed to validate their genuine identity as followers of Christ, generally couldn’t point back to any single event of “getting saved.” Why not? This pattern frustrated me. Years later I served on the board of a wonderful mission agency called International Teams (IT). One summer I visited IT missionaries across Europe, and, in case after case, I’d ask, “How’s the work here going?” and they’d say something like “It’s going great. The church we’re working with is really growing. More and more people are coming to Christ. But, it is confusing. It used to be that you could point to a specific day when they accepted Christ. Now it seems more like they come to church, get involved, learn, grow, and a year later, it’s clear they’ve become Christians but nobody knows when.” They were noticing the same trend I had noticed. What was going on?

For all of these reasons and more, I have let go of my focus on “punctiliar salvation,” a preoccupation with an event or point at which a person “gets it.” In fact, I came up with a little diagram to show various processes by which people seem to come to Christian faith and commitment.



Line A represents the “punctiliar salvation” focus. One is born “dead in trespasses and sins,” with no spiritual life, nothing happening between one’s soul and God. At some point (perhaps during childhood or adolescence, or perhaps after a terrible crisis or personal failure in adulthood), one turns to God, is born again, and a new life begins.

Line B represents the Pentecostal or charismatic focus. As in Line A, one is born and does not grow spiritually until one is born again, and then one lives at a higher but stagnant level until one is filled with or baptized in the Holy Spirit. Then one begins to grow.

Line C represents a more Catholic or mainline Protestant view. One is born and raised in the “training and instruction of the Lord.” At various times, one experiences ups and downs spiritually. There may be defining moments (like confirmation) and turning points along the way, but basically life is seen as a gradual spiritual growth process, and no single conversion event is expected.

Line D represents the person who says, “I have always believed in and loved God.” I used to think that people who said this were being dishonest, until I thought about John the Baptist, who was described by Luke as being filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15). In other words, his infant capacity was filled with God, and his toddler capacity was similarly filled with God, and so on, until full adulthood, when he continued to live in the fullness of a relationship with God. Perhaps John was a rare or unique case,



but his example opens up this possibility.

Looking back at April's experience, which line would you use to describe her experience? Or do you even need to try to graph her spiritual progress? This brings us to a key insight into spiritual friendship: *Rather than requiring people to fit into one of these categories, a spiritual friend tries to discern which is happening and to encourage the process.*

This is not to say that spiritual friends are ignorant of the importance of events when, in fact, the opposite is true. In this regard, I think back to my days as a college instructor. My wife and I lived just off campus, and on Thursday nights we started a fellowship group that welcomed both committed Christians and uncommitted spiritual seekers for an hour of Bible study, discussion, singing, and prayer. Marie, one of my former students, began attending, and she showed real interest. After the meeting one night, I was talking to her while people were mingling around our apartment, enjoying some refreshments.

I asked her, "Marie, where would you say you are in relation to God right now? Are you out on the street looking at God's house? Are you walking up the sidewalk? Are you knocking on the front door? Or, are you inside and part of the family?" There is no right or wrong answer to this question. It is a question that helps a person locate himself or herself on the spiritual journey. (I sometimes ask a question similar to this: "How would you describe your relationship to God at this point? Are you strangers, acquaintances, dating, engaged, happily married, unhappily married, separated, divorced, or something in between?" These kinds of questions seem to help people help me know how to help them. By telling me where they are in the process, they help me know how to help them take the next step. "Helping people take the next step" is a great way to define spiritual friendship, wouldn't you agree?)

This kind of question made sense to ask at this time because Marie and I had been conversing about her spiritual life for several months. I knew that she came from a religious family,

but had rejected Christianity upon entering college and had considered herself an atheist for a few years. But she felt that atheism left her without meaning or hope, and she had begun feeling a kind of spiritual emptiness. As my student, she sensed that I was a "spiritual person," which encouraged her to talk to me after class and get better acquainted. She told me that her boyfriend, with whom she lived, wasn't interested in spirituality, but that she was. When I told her about our Thursday night group, she said she would like to come.

So I felt comfortable asking this question, knowing that she had been coming on Thursday nights for several weeks now, learning more about God, the Bible, Jesus, and what it would mean to be a Christian. Marie said, "I guess I'm knocking at the front door, wondering how to get in."

At that moment, I knew that an "event" was ready to happen. I asked her, "Would you like me to help you take the next step inside?"

Her eyes brimmed with tears, and she said, "Yes. I was hoping someone would help me. I feel like I want to come in, but I don't know what to do."

I then felt God's Spirit nudging me to invite others to be part of the event that was about to occur. (This too is an essential element of spiritual friendship—being sensitive to God's Spirit, who guides us in what to say and do through what some people call "promptings"—or what I'm here calling a "nudge." Not a great theological term, but I think you get the idea.)

I asked Marie if she'd mind the whole group being part of this, and she said that it would be fine. Obviously, she had a high degree of confidence in me that I wouldn't embarrass her or do anything "weird"—a confidence built through our spiritual friendship over several months. So I got everyone's attention and asked them to sit down again, and I explained, "Marie would like to become part of God's family tonight. So I thought we all could be part of welcoming her in. Marie, I'd like to lead



you in a prayer that you can either pray out loud or silently after me, whichever you prefer. Okay?" She agreed and preferred to pray silently. Then we all bowed our heads, and I invited those who were sitting close by to lay their hands on Marie and pray for her. Then I prayed, "God, I want to be part of your family. I want to change the direction of my life to love you with all my heart and love other people as myself. I want to be a follower of Your Son, Jesus, for all the days of my life....Marie, if there's anything else you want to say, just say it now, and when you're done, let us know by saying 'amen.' And everyone, be praying for Marie right now." When she said "amen," everyone applauded and got in line to give her a hug, and that marked the beginning of her new life as a follower of Christ.

For another friend, the event occurred at church one Sunday. At Cedar Ridge, we celebrate communion each week, and we do it Catholic-or Episcopal-style, with people coming forward to receive the bread and wine. Marv had been coming to Cedar Ridge for a few months, having been invited by his teenage daughter. When he heard I enjoyed the outdoors, he invited me to take a hike with him sometime at a nearby park, which gave us a chance to begin a spiritual friendship. At that point, he told me he didn't believe in God, but was learning a lot and getting closer to faith. I encouraged him to keep coming and to let me know if I could do anything for him. Each Sunday, when people came forward for communion, he would remain in his seat, because he understood that communion was an expression of faith in and commitment to Christ—something he didn't share. But then, one Sunday, I noticed he came forward. He caught my eye on his way back to his seat and walked over and gave me a "high five"—his way of saying that he had passed an important milestone. I hope for Marv, every Sunday as he takes communion, he will be reaffirming the decision he "went public" with that day. In fact, I hope that is how every Christian experiences communion.

So, yes, there are conversion events, but these events are better seen as milestones in an ongoing process. While this

process model may seem like a departure from the traditional focus on the conversion event familiar to many evangelicals, Robert Webber's *Journey to Jesus* (Abingdon, 2001) makes clear that the process model of conversion is in fact an ancient and orthodox idea, not a new or heterodox one. In the early centuries of the church, he explains, a four-stage process became normative. The four stages of the process (seeker, hearer, kneeler, and faithful) were marked by milestone events or rites of passage, thus synthesizing the values of both event and process models.

In all of these ways, we celebrate milestone events in the spiritual journey. But we keep the conversion event rooted in its proper context—a process of spiritual growth and change. If the process "works," the events will happen. Without the process, the events may be illusory, meaningless, appearances without reality.