

Last week Max became a Christian. Max is 7 and is the son of some friends of mine in the United States. Max and his mom were standing in the hall of a large convention centre, in the middle of a 3 day long Christian conference. And this is how Max became a Christian.¹

max: mom? i think i want to be a christian.

Max's mum: really? what do you think that means?

max: i dunno, like, opening your hands to God or something?

Max's mum: well, yeah, kind of. it means that you want to get to know God and what God loves and how much God loves you. it means you want to live your life in the way that God wants; it means that you want to be like Jesus as much as you can.

max: yeah, that. i want to be that.

Max's mum: then i guess you are.

max: huh?

Max's mum: some people think it's important to actually say some kind of prayer to God, but what's really important is that you know that you want to follow Jesus.

max: [starts dancing down the hall and singing] i'm a christian, i'm a christian.

Max's mum: would you like to say something to god about what you're thinking? [ie pray]

max: [stops] yeah. [Looks up] God? [starts dancing] i'm a christian, i'm a christian

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Max has obviously been thinking and wants to be a Christian. Max' mum checks that Max is clear on what being a Christian is. Max's mum affirms Max's process of wanting. And helps Max to pray in a very natural, very 7 year old appropriate way.

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THEN the next day, Max begins to witness to his faith. Max excitedly asks his sister liesl, "are you a christian? i am."

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Last week I asked the question; Is becoming a Christian an event or a process? I compared the apostle Paul and disciple Peter. Was conversion an event; sudden, one-off, emotional, instantly transforming? Or was conversion a process; a long, slow journey with many different moments of challenge

And the answer is both. While Paul was an event - instant, emotional –

¹ <http://www.ysmarko.com/?p=192>

Peter's was a process – a journey with many, many steps.

All people are made with unique fingerprints, so surely the unique fingerprints of God will be on our conversion.

And what better illustration than Max, dancing his way to faith. Max's mother doesn't rush Max into a set prayer.

Instead, she realises that Max has obviously been thinking and absorbing all sort of ideas about wanting to be a Christian. Max's mum checks that Max is clear on what being a Christian is. Max's mum affirms Max's process of wanting, affirms 7 years of listening and thinking and absorbing, And then helps Max to pray, to uniquely dance his way to God.

All conversions are unique. And church's are generally do better at event than process. Church's are generally better at a Greg Laurie crusade: Invite your mates, listen to the speaker, go forward, say the set prayer.

Like the apostle Paul. Which is excellent. Some people get saved. Praise God.

But what about the Peter's? And church's often aren't as good at conversion as process.

And so quite a number of you last Sunday whispered to me "I'm a Peter. Steve, I was a process."

And often we're a bit embarrassment. That our conversion wasn't like Paul, it wasn't dramatic, we can't remember the date or the place. And so what does a church look like that takes conversion as process seriously? What does a church look like that wants to help Peter's follow God.

Firstly, Church took the Peter's seriously would have **lounges**. Spaces with sofas. You sit in someone's lounge and you talk about real-life issues, about the hard stuff. A church serious about evangelism as process would tackle head-on the hard stuff in people's lives. It would use seminars and small groups and group activities.

Jason: Excuse me Steve. So like here at Opawa, we could offer seminars on healthy marriages, with information on how to fight fair and keep the romantic love going.

Exactly. And because love comes from God, then meeting Jesus is seamlessly woven into the discussion. 1 Corinthians 13 and Jesus as the greatest example.

Jason: And we could offer single parenting groups, practical advice on boundary setting, finding peer support. And with testimonies from Christian single parents about how God has helped them and about how they've maintain a relationship with God.

Steve: Very practical Jason. Church as lounge. With sofas. Using small groups and seminars to tackle the hard stuff in people's lives. Lots of practical help - divorce recovery, coping with aging parents, life transitions, grief, healthy eating - and because we are Christians, God is seamlessly woven into the content of what we say.

A church serious about evangelism as process would have lounges, where over time, in relationship, we tackle life's hard issues.

Secondly, a church serious about Peter's, about conversion as process, would have **dinner tables**. At tables you are hungry and at tables you eat. A church serious about evangelism as process would feed people. It would start with what makes people hungry.

Jason: So Steve, when I go shopping in book shops, I see all these blank journals. Journalling is really popular. So here at Opawa we could feed this hunger for journaling by offering courses on how to journal spiritually.

We could offer ideas on how to journal, we could teach from the journals of others, including the spiritual journals of say David in the Psalms. By getting people journalling, we'd be encouraging them to reflect on their spiritual journey.

Exactly Jason. Going beyond a diary with dates and what I ate for breakfast, but using the journal as a tool to learn more about what God has been doing in our lives.

And Steve, quite a number of us at Opawa are using online web-sites, we blog. So we could feed people by offering a course on spiritual practices of using the internet. We could gain skills on how to speak of what God is doing in our lives on-line.

Or we could offer a prayer garden and seminars on ways to meditate. It would offer Christian meditation.

Exactly Jason. By feeding people's hunger, and by allowing them to actually do stuff, followed by focused God-discussion, surely that would help Peter's take steps toward God.

*Church as lounge. Church as dining table. Good, practical stuff Steve:
Small groups around marriage and single parenting
Seminars on spiritual journeying or Christian meditation.*

So I've offered some practical examples. Alongside the practical examples, a church committed to conversion as a process, would need some underlying stepping stones.

First stepping stone would variety. We'd need to be constantly creative and adaptive and flexible. We'd have to be issue focused and audience focused. We wouldn't be firing a shot gun – masses of pellets and hope to get one bird, but we'd be like a rifle, focused and clear.

A second stepping stone would be celebrate small. At a big evangelistic rally, you count success by large numbers. But if we had lots of variety, then success would be all those small groups added together. Sort of like Jesus parable of the 1 and the 99. We'd have to keep 1 focused, not 99 focused.

A third stepping stone, we'd have to see people as pre-Christian, not anti-Christian. We'd have to be willing to believe that God can be active in people's lives before they were Christian. And this would change our conversation. It would not be us and them. It would be, how can any person, take a next step toward Jesus.

Fourthly, we'd have to keep focused. There would always be the temptation to do a journaling seminar and miss the evangelistic challenge of getting honest about your spiritual journey and discern what your next step is. Sort of like a focus lens on a camera. We'd have to not just point it in the right direction, but make sure the evangelistic lens was kept in focus.

Four stepping stones. How would they have helped 7 year old Max?

Variety, being flexible enough to encourage Max to find God by dancing.

- Celebrate small, one 7 year old in the corridor of a huge big Christian conference.
- Pre-Christian, God at work in Max long before he ever said: mom? i think i want to be a Christian.
- And it would need to keep evangelistically focused. What is the next step for Max? What is the next step in his Christian journey?

Four stepping stones. How would it have helped the disciple Peter?

- The variety of Jesus using such different questions - Follow me – who do you say that I am – do you love me,
- Celebrate small, Jesus taking the time after the resurrection to have one conversation with one disciple – do you love me.
- Work with a pre-Christian, Peter you have no idea what a suffering Messiah is, but follow me.

Conclusion

I started with Max, A unique singing, dancing, conversion. I asked the question, What would a church, committed to conversion as a journey, look like?

I've suggested lounge rooms and dining tables,
And stepping stones of
Variety; Smallness; Pre-Christian; And focus.

If you want to keep thinking about this, about what Opawa could look like if it was committed to evangelism as a journey, then I have copies of a chapter from a book I've found helpful. Grab them from the front, take it home to think and pray and let keep talking.

Let's pray, *God of event and God of process,*
God of Paul and God of Pete, Guide us as a church.
That through our life and our ministry
People find a relationship with you,
Both in event and in process, Keep us focused I pray.

Sermon shaped by:

John Drane, *Evangelism for a New Age*, Zondervan, 1995.

Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 1999.