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The Process of Conversion as Explained by the Great Controversy Metaphor

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Conversion is a process, barely noticeable at first, then proceeding by steps and occasional leaps until one has turned away from sin and toward God. Experience bears evidence that the process does not end at a moment of rebirth, but continues as, having been reborn, one learns to walk in step with God and say no to temptation.

The Bible presents the idea that we are in the midst of a war between Christ and Satan which has lasted thousands of years, began before creation, and will end with the last judgment and the destruction of everything evil and bent. The war is often called the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan, and its battlefield is now this world.

I submit, however, that this war also has a personal component. Each one of us is a battlefield, as well, and in us Christ and Satan fight for supremacy, all our lives. What follows will present this personal Great Controversy metaphor and show how it helps to explain the conversion process.

The day's topic in my Old Testament Literature class was the Old Testament evidence for the resurrection of the dead and what happens after death. It was an important, carefully biblical, but unavoidably controversial thing to discuss in a state university class where half the students were Catholic, a quarter mainline Protestant, and a quarter Evangelical or Charismatic.

The students had already read a 6,000 word handout on the topic and looked up about thirty Bible passages, so they knew what we were going to discuss. Their faces were intent, their eyes sharp, and many sat on the edges of their seats. I had warned them that teaching "by the Book," *sola scriptura*, meant that at some point in the semester everyone would be offended by something I

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taught, when the teachings of the Bible conflicted with the traditions of their church. This topic was bound to offend.

They were listening, they were thinking, but no one seemed offended. Their questions were good ones. If the soul is merely dust animated by the breath or spirit of life, given by God, then when that spirit returns to God, can it think? How can God resurrect dust and give it a person's thoughts? Can people be resurrected if they are cremated? If the spirits of the dead can't float around and haunt us, then what are ghosts?

Can Demons Attack Christians?

Cynthia raised her hand. She was a non-traditional student in her thirties, happily married, an active nine-year-old Christian, and eager to go all the way with God.

"Is it possible," she asked, "for a born again Christian to be attacked by demons? Last winter I woke up one night with an overpowering feeling that my house was filled with something evil. I prayed frantically for my husband and children and walked through the house consecrating each room to God."

"What happened then?" I asked.

"Finally the feeling that there were demons present lessened and went away, and I seemed to feel peace settling over the house."

"Yes," I said, "I've experienced that."

"But I've been born again," Cynthia said. "How can demons gain access to me? I belong to God!"

I smiled from my seat on my desk and looked around at the watching faces. As I did I asked God to guide me.

You Are an Island

"There's a war on," I said. "This world is a battlefield between Christ and Satan. Even though Christ won the crucial battle at the cross, Satan hasn't given up fighting. He won't give up until he's destroyed. He knows his time is short, but he's going to take as many of us with him as he can. That's why he still tempts us. That's why we still sin and suffer."

Everyone seemed to be with me so far. "Let me answer your question, Cynthia, by way of an illustration, an extended metaphor, a sort of parable. According to the preacher John Donne, 'No man is an island,' but let's pretend that you are. We'll call you 'Cynthia Island.'"

"Let's say that Cynthia Island is about the size of, oh, Vermont, or perhaps Sicily or Crete. It's surrounded by the sea. Imagine several hundred villages, a few dozen towns, several cities, and a million citizens. Imagine mountains and valleys, fields and forests, rivers, high cliffs overlooking the sea, and sandy beaches.

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Enemy Attack

“When you were born, Cynthia, Cynthia Island was under the King’s control, the rightful King, and the island was at peace, though there were some dangerous cliffs and swamps and wild animals.

“However, there was an enemy prince across the sea who hated the King and coveted Cynthia Island. So even before your birth the enemy attacked, but in such a subtle way that it seldom raised suspicions. When you were a child spies reported on what people were saying and doing. Agents infiltrated and began influencing people’s thoughts, suggesting that if they were free of the King and His laws, their lives would change for the better: more excitement, fun, intellectual challenge, progress.

“The King’s troops sensed the simmering rebellion, and they tried to dissuade the people, but to no avail. Terrorists struck all over the island, and the islanders became afraid and lost faith in the King’s power to care for them and save them. Enemy troops landed in the guise of a ‘liberation army,’ took over several towns. The people gave the King’s troops less and less support, rather than turning to them for help.

“Finally, Cynthia, about the time you were old enough to make your own decisions—the age of accountability, whenever that is—the citizens of Cynthia Island demanded the right to vote on whether they should be under the King’s control, or independent. The King graciously allowed this vote, but He lost, and He and his troops had to leave the island, turning over control to the citizens, or so the citizens thought. The King formed a government in exile and awaited the opportunity to return.

Independence or Tyranny?

“The citizens soon discovered that with the King gone, there was no way to keep out the enemy prince and his troops. The enemy quickly conquered the island, and the enemy prince claimed it as his own, even though he told the islanders that now at last they were independent and free, and he was merely leading a ‘peacekeeping force’ to guarantee their freedom from the King.

“As promised, there was more excitement, more fun, more intellectual challenge, more progress, but there was little peace, little rest. There were moments when some people sensed they had been misled. In the end, everything they did seemed to turn sour.

“The enemy had won the hearts of the islanders through patient deception, quiet insinuation, cunning argument, through telling people what they wanted to hear and promising them anything. The people continued to believe themselves independent and democratic. The enemy wanted them to think that. However, though the enemy troops were seldom seen, they were everywhere, unrecognized. Whenever a few islanders tried to go in a direction that displeased the enemy, they were soon forced back into compliance. The people’s freedom was an illusion, but a powerful illusion, and it fooled most of them. They were sure

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they were free, and they bragged about the freedom which had allowed them to expell the King.

The King Fights Back

“Meanwhile, the rightful King and His government and troops were in exile, but they did not give up the fight. Much as the enemy prince had done, the King sent special agents to infiltrate Cynthia Island. The difference was that they were not deceitful. They whispered into open ears; they touched open hearts; they knocked quietly.

“Where islanders seemed interested, the infiltrators passed on messages from the King. They gave them instruction manuals, and as people read those manuals they learned to be partisan fighters, opposing the enemy occupation. They joined the resistance movement, doing the King’s will and work. The partisans began sabotaging communications and transportation and spreading the word that the King was coming back.

“As the resistance movement grew, the partisans began attacking enemy strongholds, but with little success. They were fighting for the King, but in their own strength—a recipe for failure. A few villages were retaken, lost, and captured again. Paratroopers landed and helped the partisans. There was fierce fighting.

“The King’s troops tried to invade by sea many times, tried to establish a beachhead, but without much success. There wasn’t enough popular support. Finally, though, with the invitation of the resistance, a massive invasion carried the day. Yard by yard, the King’s troops pushed forward, and they captured more and more of Cynthia Island. When an enemy-caused famine or plague made the islanders hungry or sick, or when an earthquake knocked down houses or enemy troops used too much force while policing the populace, the people thought again of the peace they’d had under the true King. Then they supported the partisans by offering food and shelter, and the King’s troops prospered in their fight.

“The time came when the enemy held only the larger towns and the cities, but the gates were strong and locked. If you walked through the countryside, you would say that Cynthia Island was again under the King’s control, but that wasn’t true, because the enemy-ruled cities were like tumors in the heart of the island.

Surrender and Rebirth

“At last, hungry, exhausted by the fight, and no longer blinded by the enemy’s lies, the city dwellers threw open the gates during the darkest night of the year and welcomed in the King’s troops as the enemy fled in panic.

“When the rightful King arrived, the people repented and confessed that they were wrong to try to be independent. They had been a country of ‘do-it-myself-ers,’ but now they realized that ‘I can do it myself’ was merely an an-

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cient enemy lie. They begged the King's forgiveness, and the King forgave them.

"This, Cynthia, was of course your condition when you were born again. After years of being under Satan's control, after years of God patiently wooing you or battering at your heart, after giving up bits of yourself or most of yourself and thinking that was enough, you surrendered fully to Him and were born again. You were now a citizen of God's Kingdom, an adopted child of the King.

"Just ask yourselves, all of you, if this hasn't been your experience. You can remember little moments of grace—the wonder of holding a newborn baby, a perfect day, an unexpected kindness, a few encouraging words which meant much more to you than the speaker intended—and as you look back you can see God's hand there, drawing you nearer when you hardly knew Him. That was the undercover work, training the partisans.

"Then perhaps you learned about Christ, felt like you'd accepted Him, started calling yourself a Christian, and thought you'd arrived. That was the King's troops establishing a beachhead, getting ashore. But if you've continued in your faith you've gained victory over this or that sin or bad habit, or grown in your devotional life, and you've thought, 'Wow! I thought I was a Christian before, but I see now that I had no idea what being a Christian meant. Now at last I'm truly a Christian.' That was like the King's troops capturing enemy strongholds, liberating villages.

"If you're like me, Cynthia, you claimed Jesus as your Savior years before you submitted to Him as your Lord. Jesus as Savior invaded in force and captured the countryside. But it wasn't until you submitted to Him as your Lord that the city gates were thrown open and He became the true King of Cynthia Island and the enemy could be expelled.

"That's when you were born again. Before, Satan was your lord, but your Savior was fighting to save you. Now, your Savior is your Lord, but Satan is fighting to get back in. This time, though, you recognize his tricks, and you know he wants to enslave you again.

"Sometimes, despite knowing the danger, you deliberately let Satan capture a village or two, for some reason. Perhaps he entices you with some trinkets, offers to entertain you, and you open your gates. Then you have to repent and ask your Lord to retake the lost territory and make it His own again.

"I sensed God's presence here and there for years when I hardly knew Him and didn't walk with Him at all. Then for ten years I went to church, thought I was religious. Step by step, as I was ready, God led me, and always I thought 'Now I'm a Christian, and I wasn't before.' Only then, after a decade, did I finally surrender everything to God and tell Him, 'You'll have to work your way in me, because I can't do this myself.'

"That's when I was truly born again and my nature was changed. That's when the peace came, the joy, and also more and more victories and miracles (even though there were victories and miracles before, as well). That's when my

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own island became the King's private property, in which He could will and do His good pleasure.

The Enemy Fights On

"This is not the end of the story of Cynthia Island, though. The cities had opened the gates, and the enemy had fled, but there were still enemy strongholds here and there, still enemy troops living in underground bunkers and tunnels.

"One by one, the King's army demolished the strongholds, to the extent that the islanders were willing to let this happen. Some of these strongholds were in palaces, cathedrals, museums, concert halls, banks, and people were often loathe to agree to the destruction of these 'cultural treasures' until there was clearly no other option.

"Meanwhile, although Cynthia Island was now generally peaceful and happy, the enemy was always watching for moments and places of opportunity. The enemy stirred up towns, terrorized the countryside, and tried to launch major offensives.

"However, once they had surrendered to the King, the citizens remained generally faithful. There was always someone somewhere, it seemed, in rebellion, but the tendency and desire was to serve the King.

"The skirmishing continued, as it had for years. But there was a very great difference between living under the enemy's rule while the King tried to gain control, and living under the King's rule while the enemy struggled to regain its power.

"Gradually, as the years passed, the enemy strongholds were eliminated. But the enemy never gave up trying to recapture Cynthia Island. It never gave up its subtle or ruthless attacks for long. Sometimes it was a campaign of disinformation which encouraged an ironic view of the King's government. Sometimes it was biological warfare, a plague that destroyed thousands. Sometimes it was terrorism which murdered innocent children and led some to doubt that the King was still in control. Sometimes it was the assassination of faithful civil servants, merely because their faithfulness was a stench in the enemy's nostrils.

The Island Is You

"So, Cynthia, that's you today. You've surrendered completely to God and been reborn as His child. Now you belong to Him and He is your Lord. Loving thoughts of Him fill your mind, and you are constantly walking and talking with Him. One by one, sometimes painlessly and sometimes after a hard fight, God is cleansing you of your bad habits, your evil tendencies, which serve as demonic strongholds.

"Being born again doesn't mean you can no longer sin. It means you've given God the right to remove sins from your life whenever He pleases. It means you *want* to be freed from sin, whatever the cost. It means you want to be as

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righteous in the flesh as God has declared you to be in Christ, and God has made that possible by adopting you as His child.

“Meanwhile, Satan and his minions keep attacking you in various ways, trying to turn you away from God, whether for awhile or forever. This means you are always under attack, and sometimes those attacks can be painful or frightening.

“It’s not that one moment you are saved, the next unsaved, then back again. You used to be lost, but God was fighting to have you for His own. Now you are saved, now you are adopted, but Satan is fighting to get you back. Satan wants you to be like the Prodigal Son and reject your Father, except without ever returning home. If you did that you would still be your Father’s child, but you would be a *lost* child. The presence of fighting in you doesn’t mean you don’t belong to God. All you need to do is to continue to faithfully and obediently walk with the One who has always been entirely faithful to you. Let Him do the fighting for you and in you. That’s what faith is. It’s like allowing a surgeon to cut out a cancer. You can’t do it yourself, so you have to have faith that the Great Physician can do it. Your job is to deliberately go under the knife.”

For some time I had been watching Cynthia wipe tears from her eyes. “That really makes everything clear,” she said. “That’s my life. I’m still giving things over to God for Him to deal with in His own way. He’s still guiding me into all truth.”

“Me, too,” I said. “We’re both refugees on an upward path, and that path is littered with the heavy belongings we’ve dropped by the wayside as we’ve learned to trust God and believe that He will provide.”

God at War in Us

I looked at the students around the classroom. “This illustration may be a metaphor,” I said, “but there’s a lot of truth in it. Each one of you is an island. Some of you are still under enemy occupation. But if so, your being here is proof that God is fighting to conquer you and willing you to surrender and throw open the gates to your heart. As you do your assignments for this class, the King’s resistance movement is growing. Some of you have already surrendered to the King and welcomed Him back onto your island. Now you are at various stages of destroying enemy strongholds and allowing the King’s troops to beat back enemy attacks.

“This Great Controversy between Christ and Satan is deadly serious, a matter of eternal life or eternal death, not only for you but for your friends and loved ones and for those who have never heard the Gospel.

“As Joshua said, ‘Choose ye this day whom ye will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.’ Have a good weekend—don’t do anything God wouldn’t do.”

I exchanged smiles with thirty islands as they turned in their daily work and filed out of the classroom. I love teaching the Bible!