
FAITH, EDUCATION, ACTION

THE THREE STEP PROCESS TO CONVERSION AND PEACEMAKING

by Gene Stoltzfus

Introduction:

When we are faced with perplexing injustice as Christians, we ask two questions. "What does the Bible say?" and "What can we learn about the situation?" To these two queries we know that a third question must be added, "What can we do about it?"

Bible Study:

Throughout history new and vibrant Bible study came to be practiced during special times of crisis. We witness the rise of thousands of Bible study groups among the poor in the third world. Often the question posed to me by such groups has been, "Where is the new heaven and the new earth?" In the peace movement we find a similar hunger for answers from the Bible.

This interest in the Bible can lead in two directions. First, we can search for personal life-fulfilling spiritual answers to meaning in our own lives. But if we are poor or gifted with the question of how God works, our Bible study leads to renewed investigation of the world around us.

In many of our churches Bible study and education about the world is where it stops. When that happens paralysis and lethargy set in unless the facts of the faith and the facts of the situation lead to action.

Reflection and Analysis:

The word conversion has come to have new meaning for peace people. For us, conversion implies a new integration of Biblical faith with action to make visible and condemn sin, especially social sin.

When we examine ourselves we find that the real influences that bring changes are *people* not only *information*. More specifically it is the people whose lives reflect integration of prayer, honesty and action. The bringers of conversion are those individuals and communities (churches) who are willing to speak the truth and follow through with action and deeds.

Facts might change people's minds. The heart is changed when these facts are given a human face by actions. In our work of peacemaking we are often warned that our activities might alienate people. There is therefore the temptation to reduce our work to its least offensive level. As agents of conversion however, we need to be prepared to take bold risks individually and organizationally because the full power of the gospel is not made visible by words alone.

God's work of conversion can be very discomfoting according to scripture. "Do you think I have come to establish peace on this earth? I assure you, the contrary is true; I have come for division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; father split against son, mother against daughter, son against father and daughter against mother..." (Luke 12: 51-53)

Direct Action:

As one who has experienced some of the price of civil disobedience I know that some people are turned off by my words and acts. I am frequently asked, "What good did it do?" "Was your action effective?"

In all honesty I must admit that some acts of public witness and civil disobedience are probably quite unfruitful. In our evaluation sessions following each action we often admit shoddy planning, poor judgement, or inadequate preparation. But I have come to see that we can really evaluate our work only in the light of history. Years after the Viet Nam war had passed, we learned how important our work had been, that our actions were repeatedly the subject of discussion in high

councils. For Christians these actions of “sack cloth and ashes” incorporate both the dimensions of repentance and public witness.

Criticism need not lead us to stop. In fact good criticism often lifts us to new creativity and confidence. For we know that our attempts to incarnate peace by action lead us to deeper levels of faithfulness. We are often surprised weeks, months and years later that our activities have been a source of new life for people and the subject of intense discussion in policy circles or among individuals whom we had considered uninterested.

Fact Finding:

In the work for peace we have often been criticized for inadequate investigation of the facts. That is a sound criticism which can be taken seriously within the context of our action/reflection cycle. Often we lack the benefit of careful, well-trained researchers, economists, and other specialists. Sometimes we can also become narrowly focused on our own parochial understanding and overly suspicious of expert investigation.

Summary:

Our work of assertive peacemaking will require a genuine appreciation of all the elements of faith building (Bible study, worship, spiritual disciplines), understanding the world around us (fact finding, education), and action to make visible the hidden sin. People may join with us in any of these parts of the process. They may also be turned off to us during participation in any one of these three steps.

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CIRCLE OF PEACEMAKING

