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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Havergal

George Sumner

In the chapel of the Anglican theological college in Tanzania where I, newly ordained, served, Friday afternoon was worship in English, and no hymn was more popular than Frances Ridley Havergal's "Take My Life and Let It Be". Its appeal was not only the readily graspable language, but also its message of total surrender to God. Though separated by a century and half the globe, the Tanzanians singing in that chapel were Frances' spiritual kin: Word-centred, evangelistically minded, deeply pietist, children of the Church Missionary Society, linked as East African revivalists to the Keswick movement, with just an occasional touch of perfectionism. They, like she, claimed a theology that put conversion at the very centre of the spiritual life, and accordingly they could tell a listener the day and hour when they left the old life and Jesus became their Lord and Saviour. Havergal's most famous hymn is a classic description of the experience of conversion and as such was recognisable immediately to the Tanzanians.

This chapter will reflect on the central theme of conversion in evangelical theology, as it is eloquently expressed in the piety of Havergal's hymn. We will set the piety of that hymn in its context, answer its possible detractors, and finally underline why it matters today. But at the outset, we should note a surprising and anomalous fact: that hymn is not, properly speaking about Frances' conversion! Frances Havergal gave her life to Christ in her teens, and "Take My Life..." describes an experience from her forties and in the increasing ill-health which would, a few years later, lead to her death. It seems to have taken Frances herself by surprise,¹ for she comments in her letters that she had not imagined that the Christian life could be so. After what she describes as a lifetime of spiritual struggles (though she would have looked to any observer to have been a remarkably consistent witness to her Lord!), now Christ's will seemed to be working directly through hers, and the state of resulting surrender was one of indescribable joy and peace. So in the middle of our essay, we will take a short detour to consider what this question of a second conversion has to tell us about the more general theme at hand.

To be sure, the extraordinary experience of Havergal's should be set in the context of other events on the evangelical scene in the mid-1870s. A number

of authors describe a situation marked by ecclesial conflict within the Anglican world, a sense of spiritual conflict and pessimism, and occasional tendencies toward legalism. Onto this scene burst the revivalist preaching and hymn-singing of Moody and Sankey. Within the same time-frame we also find the roots of the Keswick Convention, with its similar emphases on holiness and full surrender. A few years later and further afield the Rev. Andrew Murray, the South African revival leader and spiritual writer, had an international effect with his calls to overcome excessive fears of perfectionism and to aspire to what he called ‘entire consecration’. The cumulative result of these influences was a greater vitality and emphasis on sanctification, as well as a renewed energy for mission. At the same time it should be noted that Frances herself attributed her own experience to none of these: [prior to my consecration] ‘I have read no book, and attended no meetings or conferences.’² It would seem that this turn of emphasis was somehow ‘in the air’ in that time and place.

We would first do well to set “Take My Life...” in the fuller setting of Havergal’s life as well. She was a child of the vicarage in Victorian England, her father, with whom she was close, a noted hymnodist. She grew up in the nineteenth century world of the strife of Church parties, being herself a convinced and sometimes combative low-Church evangelical throughout her life. She proudly and consciously bore her middle name of ‘Ridley’. Though she remained close to her older brother, for example, she was troubled by his switch to the high-church side of the street. Single throughout her life, Frances devoted most of her energy to an array of Church activities. Hers was the age of the voluntary societies, and she participated in, and even started, a number: for the conversion of the Irish, for destitute girls (the society named for its contribution, ‘flannel petticoats’), for the education of the religious children of the working poor, etc. Throughout it all she had a special passion for hymnody. She was busy writing lyrics, settings, and performing, and her keenness for a career in this area puts her somewhat ahead of her time. Here too, her music was adamantly in the service of her witnessing and serving the gospel.

Before we address the question before us, we would do well to dispel several of the more facile critiques of those like Havergal who would emphasize conversion of any kind. One person might object that the implied emphasis on one’s own spiritual state leads to spiritual quietism, and indeed the further claim of ‘total surrender’ would yet more intensely seem to lead in that

direction. This quietism would seem to be the polar opposite of the social concern and engagement for the betterment of society that one would hope to see in a Christian. The answer here is ready to hand in the case of Frances Havergal, namely her constant, almost frenetic, involvement with social causes for the sake of the disadvantaged. It has taken us a century and a half to rediscover what the Victorians knew, that the most telling social activism is, in fact, 'faith based'.

Secondly, one might object that an emphasis on conversion leads to a false self-confidence or certainty that stifles spiritual advancement. But we can see from Frances' story that struggle defined her story until this last stage of her journey, which would itself seem to epitomize spiritual progress. Connected to this might be the worry that an emphasis on conversion might result in an attitude of elitism, of being the real church within the Church, but Frances' sense of being a daughter of the Church, and her clear solidarity with people of many 'sorts and conditions' would seem clearly to belie this concern.

Another set of concerns come from Havergal's own 'home field', a theologically evangelical perspective, and it concerns specifically the question the notion of being entirely sanctified found in second conversion: doesn't this challenge the Reformation emphasis on God's forgiveness of us as sinners? In response Havergal is very clear that under no conditions can a Christian believe a sinless state to be possible this side of the kingdom. At the same time she is clearly critical of a Lutheran view that we are 'at once sinners and justified' in such a way that we are too accepting of the reality of sin in our lives.³ We cannot be sinless, but at the same time Havergal insists '... being kept from falling, kept from sins, is quite another thing, and the Bible seems to teem with commands and promises about it ...'.⁴ Here her solution resembles that of John Wesley, with the same accompanying questions.

This same root concern leads to another worry, namely that total surrender or entire consecration amounts to a claim to a mystical state, which for reformation Christians claims too much for us and the possibilities of the religious life. The response here is the same: doesn't an underestimation of our possibility for sanctification in fact devalue God's sovereign power to change us, to make new life in Him manifest? At what point does worry about saying too much about us amount to saying too little about Him? To someone like

Frances Havergal, the experience of total surrender was simply a superlative experience of reliance on Jesus for everything: ‘...to think that you and I are never to have another care or another fear, but that Jesus has simply undertaken every thing for us...’.⁵

Now the ground is prepared and we can begin to consider the theological questions provoked and the significance for us as Christians, of the hymn in question, called ‘the consecration hymn’. It is expressed in the clearest, simplest terms, as opposed to many other lyrics of Havergal’s, which can sometimes tend to artifice and a flowery style. It has the consistency of form of an experience seared in the memory. The logic of the whole is that of surrender: ‘take my life ... my hands ... my feet ... my riches ... my mind ...’. This logic is associated in Scripture with the theme of sacrifice, and it is the verse from the Eucharistic prayer of the Book of Common Prayer, echoing as it does the verse from Romans 12 which, as a superscription, appropriately conveys this: ‘we offer and present unto thee our selves, our souls and bodies, to be living spiritual sacrifice....’

But the first thing to notice in this regard, is that the speaker calls on God to take her life, hands, wealth, etc. The action is to be God’s. While the speaker does call upon God and give him this series of commands, these are imperatives of adoration and deference—‘you come and do the taking, using, consecrating’. Our action is to recognize and celebrate the prior action of God. This lies at the very heart of the experience of conversion, namely that it seems as if it were our decision, our opting for a certain kind of attitude and religious life. But in reality, to the converted, it is the adoring recognition of the overarching action of God, not least in provoking the very desire to have God take the initiative!

Second, we hear in this hymn of the most perfect kind of integration or harmony of life: our benevolence, our goods, our intellectual life, and our emotional life too, all are put on the same plane and all move toward the same end. But of course this is only attainable as we cease to seek to attain it. ‘He who would save his life will lose it, but he who would lose his life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it...’ We come to live a unified and coherent emotional and spiritual life only as we live toward a single goal beyond ourselves and ahead of ourselves, and further, as we give ourselves over toward

this end to the One who makes each aspect of our lives. Otherwise we, in the end, live lives that are fragmented and disjointed, never really adding up to anything or cohering toward any end we love more than ourselves. The philosophical life was the pursuit of the happy life, *eudaimoneia*, and this pursuit finally ceases in satisfaction in the One who is the end of all our striving.

Third, this hymn describes to us that intensity of activity and thought which is really rest. There is implied in the hymn the reality that these things are all burdens to us while we remain on our own, and though they are our gifts and wealth, they lead us only to what the Preacher called ‘vanity of vanities’. ‘You take them, Lord, for I cannot use them, and when I try they give me that restlessness whose only use is that it leads to you.’ Willing which follows on God’s willing is that movement which rests already in God. In this rest we find that combination of enjoying and anticipating which lies at the heart of the pilgrim following in the time between Christ’s resurrection and his return.

Each of these three aspects of Havergal’s most famous hymn point in the same direction: the sovereign initiative of God in conversion. This is precisely what the Church means by ‘grace’, namely the act of God that precedes our effort and ‘returns not again empty’. Now the challenge in understanding conversion is of course that it is **our** experience of **his** initiative. The problem is that our experience is always a partial, flawed apprehension of something much greater. What God does is decisive, and yet my own experience waxes and wanes, grows and changes. God’s Lordship knows know bounds, as it fills time and space, and yet the power of conversion is that it has happened in this my concrete and particular life. This creates perspectival challenges for our talk about the work of God in conversion. Another way to put the matter is this: since the reality at work on us is greater than we can apprehend, both what we do experience and what we don’t has something important to say about God.

In conversion, I know that Christ on the cross has effected my justification once and for all, and this is true whether I feel it or not, whether my own experience ebbs or flows. That, paradoxically, is the heart of the experience of Christian assurance. Hence, in a strange way, our not ‘feeling it’ says something important about God, namely that he is greater than my momentary apprehension. At the same time, one would worry if one did not believe that

God's work within one permeates and transforms one's feelings and self-awareness. Then justification would indeed be open to the criticism that it is but a 'legal fiction'. That God can break through and dramatically change us also says something wonderful about God. So there is a quality of witness both in what I do not apprehend, and what I do! From the point of view of God, both say something about the decisiveness and the efficacy of His work in me.

We are now in position to traverse our forewarned detour. The problem, put simply is this: if a Christian has a second experience of conversion, what does that say about the first which, after all, was supposed to bespeak the decisive change God has wrought in the believer? Incidentally one can compare this to the traditional debate about a more catholic emphasis on the sacrament of baptism, which similarly stressed that what God did required no addition. If more is needed, then what does that say about baptism? And if more is not needed, then doesn't the Christian life become a fiction and isn't God's power actually to make the effect of His justification real in the world thrown in question? In short, what is the relationship of what theology calls 'justification' by grace and our understanding of the process we call 'sanctification'? We have already found the key, which is to make the starting-point what God is doing in each human event or experience. Conversion, first of all an event of grace, though it involves a decision, bespeaks the decisiveness of God's hand upon us. He claims us for His own and seals us with His Holy Spirit.

But what then can this second experience mean? It is a witness that that same grace has the power to claim all of us, and to change us utterly. Each witnesses in its own way grace, the first to grace's prevenience and decisiveness, the second to its breadth and power. They are not best thought of in an additive way, for the perspective of God is simply a different perspective to ours. Second, conversion does indeed remind us that sanctification is complicated, and it is difficult to systematize it in a single way for all people. One cannot be said to need second conversion to be saved, but one does indeed need that which second conversion witnesses to uniquely, namely the grace of God in its full biblical sense.

Why does the vivid picture of conversion rendered in "Take My Heart..." matter? Conversion has always been at the heart of evangelical religion, which wants to maintain two of the great emphases of the Reformation tradition: that

salvation is totally dependent on Christ and His prior work, and that by faith we must confess His work *pro nobis*, ‘on our behalf’, for an intellectual assent that does not touch our own heart and life is not what the Bible means by ‘faith’. Conversion, then, is the point at which what are often called the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ sides of faith are held rightly together. So, first of all, conversion matters theologically. Secondly, we live in a time when the popular imagination is captured by the term ‘spirituality,’ which is felt to be the acceptable entrée into the things of God. But under these banners march much that is bogus and superficial. The experience of conversion Havergal is conveying entails the authentic spirituality of the Christian gospel, for it understands experience in light of the sovereign reality of God.

Thirdly, the theme of conversion becomes, as we have seen, a battle scene between accounts of Christianity centred on a piety of the heart, and accounts centred on social involvement (though as we have already noted, the charge of a lack of social engagement is hard to lodge against Havergal). One can trace this battle through much of modern mission history—for example in the struggle between ‘ecumenicals’ and ‘evangelicals’ in the 1960s. Both, to be sure, are intent on ‘conversion’ in the sense of transformation, though the first look mostly to the transformation of the individual heart (which may eventually lead to changes in society), while the latter look to the transformation of society as a whole (which will in turn change how individuals experiences their lives). The activist want to assert what we might call the ‘breadth’ of God’s dominion, while the pietist insists on its decisiveness, for there the ‘pearl of greatest price’, the ‘one thing needful’, makes its mark. Are we then forced to choose? To be sure, even among evangelicals one will often hear mention of conversion quickly accompanied by mention of the need to recall God’s work in society at large and indeed throughout the cosmos.

To this added reminder of the breadth of God’s rule no one could object. Just the same, in defense of the traditional evangelical emphasis, one could offer the following retort. The main point is conversion, which is to say, God’s justifying and redeeming hand which makes a decisive change in human life. Where this change begins with the individual, one can proceed quickly to add the wider circles of effect. But where one talks first of God’s work more generally in the circles of society, culture, or nature, it is rarer and more difficult for a vital concern for a decisive change in souls to follow after. In other words, concern

for the turning of the lost souls may not be sufficient, but in the real life of the Church it proves to be a necessary emphasis in the preaching and practice of the Church. So Havergal's hymnodic account of conversion matters, thirdly, because it preserves this emphasis on decisiveness, of 'the one thing needful', that might otherwise be lost.

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ENDNOTES

1. This point is made most clearly in the most helpful biography of Havergal, *Frances Ridley Havergal: Worcestershire Hymnwriter: Bromsgrove*, Havergal Society, 1979, which this essay has benefited from throughout.
2. As quoted in John Hobson, *Frances Ridley Havergal*, p. 38.
3. One can see this in her letters from the time of her second conversion.
4. Hobson, p. 38.
5. *Ibid.*