

# IMAGINING CONVERSION

Josiah Peterson on why conversion stories change us.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to act without first imagining what one is about to do. And it is difficult to imagine something one has never seen or heard described before. If an evangelist says “repent and be saved” to someone who lacks a clear idea of what “repent and be saved” looks like, the person will have a hard time acting upon the evangelist’s words, even if the person desires to do so. These situations of imaginative ignorance are where spiritual biographies can help. Spiritual biographies embody otherwise abstract concepts, like conversion, so they can be grasped by the imagination and implemented in reality. An illustrative example of this is Book VIII of Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which Augustine’s own conversion is preceded and encouraged by two other conversion stories -- that of Victorinus in Chapter Two and that of two officials in Chapter Six.

Augustine’s *Confessions* is one of the earliest and most famous spiritual autobiographies and is written in the form of a prayer—confession—to God. Augustine

recounts the details leading up to and following his conversion, from his wayward adolescence famously illustrated in the story of stealing from a pear tree simply for the pleasure of stealing, to his intellectual conversion from various forms of gnosticism to theism under the influence of St. Ambrose, to his struggles to subdue the flesh, pithily encapsulated in the lines “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.”<sup>1</sup> Augustine’s final conversion is recounted in Book VIII, Chapter Twelve: after much struggle between his mind and will, he hears a voice saying “take and read, take and read” and opens up a copy of the Scriptures to Romans 13:13-14, which proves definitive in subduing his will.<sup>2</sup> The book ends with Augustine’s taking on religious orders and offering a commentary on Genesis 1. While the “take and read” lines receive much of the attention in the Book VIII conversion story, the eleven other chapters preceding them are what set Augustine up to be receptive in this moment.

Book VIII starts with Augustine going to Simplicianus for spiritual advice, and the aged instructor of Ambrose determining that what Augustine needs most is the inspiration of a good conversion story.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed, ed. Michael P. Foley, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), VIII.7.152.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.12.159-60.

Simplicianus offers an intimate, first-hand account of the conversion of Victorinus, a celebrated Roman intellectual and translator of Plato whom Augustine had read, admired, and could relate to.<sup>3</sup> Victorinus had come to an intellectual belief in Christianity late in his life and confided as much to Simplicianus. Simplicianus asked Victorinus when he would get to see him in church, and Victorinus demurred, until one day, fearing that his refusal to confess Christ publicly would lead to Christ's denial of him publicly, Victorinus determined to become a communicant.<sup>4</sup>

Victorinus's struggle with professing his faith has the apologetic advantage of being a narrative about a real, in-the-flesh person. Humans are finite creatures, bound by time and limited by their own experiences. Victorinus's story is temporal, with a beginning, middle, and end, which is the most natural thought pattern for humans who live in time.<sup>5</sup> Humans cannot know "conversion" in the universal abstract except through the individual, particular experience of conversion and subsequent application of the individual, particular experience to the abstract, universal human experience.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.2.142-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.2.

<sup>5</sup> Holly Ordway, "Unit 3 Lecture: Augustine, Boethius," (recorded lecture, APOL 5330, Ancient Philosophy and Culture: Houston Baptist University, Spring 2018).

Holly Ordway, a spiritual autobiographer herself, explains how in a narrative, “The idea is embodied in particular details: this character, this location, this sequence of events, these colors and shapes. By the very limitation inherent in these specific choices of story, characters, and images, the truth becomes tangible, and thus more accessible and more engaging.”<sup>6</sup> Greater engagement allows for greater rational reflection and emotional connection. “As a result, we are naturally predisposed to take in truth in the form of narrative, and to use narrative forms to reflect on, process, and act on those truth claims.”<sup>7</sup>

Augustine recounts Simplicianus’s motive for telling the story as “to draw me on to the humility of Christ, hidden from the wise and revealed to little ones,”<sup>8</sup> and the story proves effective to that end. Augustine could relate to Victorinus’s intellectual movement from Platonism to Christianity, and Victorinus, as a successful rhetoric professor who gained public prominence and a statue in Rome, represented what Augustine, the teacher of rhetoric, aspired to be. Victorinus had been reluctant to follow through his intellectual conversion with public

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<sup>6</sup> Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus, 2017) 106.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine., VIII.2.142-3.

profession, just the situation Augustine finds himself in at this point in the *Confessions*. Conversion to Christianity requires humility, since it requires death to self and the life one had led up until that point. Public confession is an intimidating prospect, especially for one who has been living a publicly non-Christian life. The story of Victorinus thus proves poignant, as it shows a man who had far more to lose in public confession than did Augustine, but who still believes confession was essential to the Christian life. When Simplicianus told Victorinus's story to Augustine, Augustine "was on fire to imitate him", which, as Augustine observes, is precisely why Simplicianus told it to him.<sup>9</sup>

But while Augustine's mind is converted and, through the help of Simplicianus, his spirit is too, his passions remain rebellious and he needs the aid of another story. This story comes from Ponticianus, a "fellow countryman" and official who, upon discovering Augustine's interest in the faith, recounts to Augustine and his friends the story of St. Antony and how it affected two of Ponticianus's friends.<sup>10</sup> Ponticianus's two friends, also officials, chanced upon a "a small book in which was written the life of Antony."<sup>11</sup> St. Antony was an Egyptian

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, VIII.5.147.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, VIII.6.150.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., VIII.6.151.

saint and the father of monasticism whose own conversion was brought about by hearing the words of Matthew 19:21 read in a church and believing they were spoken as the words of God directly to him.<sup>12</sup> As one of the two friends read Antony's story aloud he "marveled at it, was inflamed by it" and began "to think how he might embrace such a life and give up his worldly employment to serve [God] alone."<sup>13</sup> Confronted by the life of Antony, he asks his companion why they spend so much effort and take so much risk to possibly befriend the emperor when "if I should choose to be a friend of God, I can become one now."<sup>14</sup> He breaks out in "heavy weeping" and chooses to take on a monastic life, as does his companion and, subsequently, even their fiancés.<sup>15</sup> This story serves as a model for Augustine to do likewise.

Augustine believes God used the conversion story of the two officials—who were not unlike Augustine in their political ambitions for life—to confront Augustine with his own mistaken priorities. Augustine recounts in his confession to God, "there was Ponticianus telling what he was telling; and again You were setting me face to face with myself, forcing me upon my own sight, that

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., VIII.12.159.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

I might see my inequity and loathe it.”<sup>16</sup> By seeing how other men respond when confronted with conviction, Augustine sees his own actions from a new perspective.<sup>17</sup> As Ordway observes, spiritual biographies can provide “The affirmation of realizing that someone else has been through similar experiences, faced similar challenges, struggled with similar difficulties.” Thus spiritual biography “provides a framework and language for better understanding one’s own experiences and also for stepping forward into new ways of thinking and acting.”<sup>18</sup> In this case, Augustine couldn’t help but approve of “those two men as I heard of their determination to win health for their souls by giving themselves up wholly to Your healing.”<sup>19</sup> Augustine knew he had been stalling for more than a dozen years. He had known the right thing to do but had been unwilling to give up his worldly passions.

Immediately following Victorinus’s and the officials’ conversion stories is Augustine’s own conversion, which

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. VIII.7.152.

<sup>17</sup> Narrative helps develop one’s theory of mind, or “the ability to imagine what another person is thinking or feeling.” Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus, 2017) 108. “Theory of mind can help us gain fresh insight into *ourselves* by seeing with another’s eyes.” 111.

<sup>18</sup> Ordway, lecture.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

bears some striking similarities.<sup>20</sup> Like the two officials, Augustine heads into a garden area with a companion and starts to weep bitterly, struggling within himself with the “pain of the new life coming to birth in him.”<sup>21</sup> When Augustine hears the “Take and read” refrain, he is inspired by what he just heard about the life of Antony, how Antony walked in on a particular Bible text being read and took it as a message from God. Augustine goes to look for the first Scripture passage he sets eyes on and also takes it as a message from God.<sup>22</sup> If not for Antony’s story, Augustine may not have thought to take this action or may not have had confidence in its Divine providence, possibly writing it off as children singing with no relevance to him. Upon his conversion, Augustine, like the officials, gives up his fiancé, committing to a celibate life of service to God and the Church. Victorinus gave up teaching when he became a Christian, and so does Augustine. While Augustine does not make a flashy, public declaration of faith like Victorinus, he seems to feel regret about this, having fallen short of his ideal model.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Augustine, VIII.12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, VIII.6.151.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, VIII.12.159-160.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, IX.2.

It is clear from how Augustine lays out Book VIII that the two prior conversion stories provide the framework for Augustine's own conversion and demonstrate to the readers of *Confessions* how they might respond to the story of Augustine's conversion. Spiritual biography, which Augustine introduces in his conversion story, adds deeper inner dimensionality to the narrative of the life of faith. Modern apologists and evangelists would do well to stock up on similar biographical stories that they can apply to the specific challenges facing their modern audiences.

