

2015

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Recommended Citation

Foubert, John D.; Brosi, Matthew W.; Watson, Angela; and Fuqua, Dale R. (2015) "Precursors To and Pathways Through Conversion: Catalytic Experiences of Born Again Christian College Students," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 14 : No. 14 , Article 2.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol14/iss14/2

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Precursors to and Pathways Through Conversion: Catalytic Experiences of Born Again Christian College Students

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Abstract

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Born again Christians are a significant religious population in the United States, and throughout the world. The process by which a born again identity is assumed is not clearly described in the research literature. Therefore, we asked 18 born again Christian college students a series of questions designed to uncover what led to their identity of being born again. Responses fell into three overarching themes. First, participants described exposure within relationships to God's principles. Second, participants noted the influence of introspection and reflection on their lives apart from the influence of God. Third, participants had an active response in which they reported such things as recognizing conviction by the Holy Spirit, that they decided to act on that conviction, and that they took action to follow Jesus. Findings are discussed with within the framework of Cohen and Hill's (2007) theory of religion as culture.

Issues of spirituality and religion have received increasing attention in the recent research literature on college students (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Bowman & Small, 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Toussaint & Jorgensen, 2008). It remains clear that religious involvement among students as they enter college is high. Fully 80% of first-year students attended religious services in the year prior to entering college, 77% currently believe in God, and 69% pray (Astin et al., 2011). As the college experience unfolds, this high level of involvement begins to diminish and students become less engaged in religious activities (Astin et al., 2011). As this happens, students become more ecumenical, believing that non-religious people can live just as morally as religious believers, and they are more likely to reject the biblical principle that God will punish those who don't believe in Him (Astin et al., 2011; Driscoll & Breshears, 2010).

A longitudinal study of over 2,500 youth and emerging adults found that far fewer people aged 18-23 identify with a particular religious group than do people in their mid-teens. The proportion of teens who identify as either Catholic or Protestant drops from 77 to 64% during this time while the proportion of students who identify as not religious jumps from 14 to 27%. Still, over half of teens remain in their religious group while they are in college (Smith, 2009).

Research has shown that those least likely to stray from their faith and most likely to subscribe to biblical principles include students who identify as either evangelical Christians, conservative Protestants, or born again Christians (Astin et al., 2011). Though these terms have slightly different meanings, they have a great deal of conceptual overlap and are often used interchangeably. The present study sought to explore how people convert to the identity of a born again Christian. Specifically, we sought to understand what happens just before someone experiences spiritual regeneration to a Christian faith, how one starts to identify as born again, and whether there are common factors that can be identified that lead to taking on a born again religious identity.

Studying the conversion experiences of people who identify as born again is highly complex due to the differing understandings of the term and how those who claim the identity conceptualize it in a way that may differ from Scripture (Foubert, Watson, Brosi, & Fuqua, 2012). The Christian concept of regeneration is central to the Gospel. The essential nature of the new birth is addressed in Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3:3 "I tell you the truth; no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again." While Christian conversion has traditionally been understood as a dramatic and often instant transformation, during the last few decades some have found this depiction lacking in describing the conversion experiences of some who identify as Christian. This subgroup perceives spiritual transformation as a process more than an event (Lee, 2008). Although the dynamic change within the Apostle Paul is the most well-known biblical

example of conversion, there are at least three other New Testament models of Christian conversion that differ from Paul's experience, suggesting that the personal nature of each individual's relationship with God is begun as uniquely as it subsequently unfolds (Smith, 2001).

Effects of Being Born Again

Research has shown that age 18 is a dynamic age for spiritual change, both in the way of growth and decline. Adopting a born again status is, not surprisingly, related to a jump in religious service attendance and a huge increase in personal religiosity (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). The effects of a born again status stretch beyond the religious realm. For example, if a student identifies as being born again, that student is less likely to smoke marijuana. Marijuana use declines even further when students have higher proportion of friends who also identify as born again (Adamczyk & Palmer, 2008). Born again teens also report better relationships with their mothers than do their peers. In addition, when teens become born again, they experience a significant improvement in their relationships with their fathers if the conversion occurs within their religious tradition (Regnerus & Burdette, 2006).

There is something about the born again experience that is qualitatively different from being a member of a church without having such an experience. For example, Tankink (2007) documents a case in which members of an Anglican Church in Africa converted to a Pentecostal Church, became born again, and experienced substantial relief from trauma. A common theme among born again Christians in that region of Africa is a post-regeneration instantaneous removal of pain that had been caused by trauma from war, significantly different from religious experiences reported by those in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches (Tankink, 2007).

Most research puts the proportion of born again Christians in the U.S. population at somewhere between one-quarter and one-third (Calhoun, Aronczyk, Mayrl, & VanAntwerpen, 2007; Smith, 2006; Smith, Faris, Denton, & Regnerus, 2003). Not surprisingly, such individuals often live in conflict with others given differing worldviews. Evidence for this conflict emerges in many contexts. For example, an ethnographic study of a Lutheran college found that a subgroup of students who adhered more strongly to biblical principles rejected the less biblically consistent programming of their institution in favor of developing their own programming. This self-designed programming supported their group identity and values (Bryant & Craft, 2010). Such conflicts are increasingly common in various denominations and corners of Christianity.

Recent research reveals that the religious beliefs of some college students who identify as Christian are in conflict with the Bible (Smith, 2009). These distinctions are particularly evident when examining denominational differences. One in five mainstream Protestant students denies that Jesus was the Son of God who was raised from the dead. This compares to one in eleven Roman Catholics and one in twenty conservative Protestants.

The same pattern exists about whether there will be a judgment day when God will reward some and punish others. Though over four out of five conservative Protestants agree, just half of Catholics and less than half of mainstream Protestants answered affirmatively (Smith, 2009). Evangelical Protestants also report stronger faith, are more likely to believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, attend church more frequently, and read the Bible more frequently than Catholics and mainline Protestants (Dougherty, Johnson, & Polson, 2007; Smith, Faris, Denton, & Regnerus, 2003).

Theoretical Frame

Cohen and Hill (2007) postulate in their theory of religion as culture that Jews, Catholics, and Protestants differ in systematic ways when it comes to religiosity and spirituality. In particular, they state that there are individualistic and collectivistic characteristics of each group that vary. Specifically, when Jews identify important life experiences, they describe collective religious encounters that are social in nature. Protestants are more likely to identify individual personal experiences with God. Catholics tend to fall somewhere in the middle of this social/God continuum. Cohen and Hill's theory suggests that many Protestant groups experience both religious and spiritual phenomena on an individual level with the person to God. This perspective stands in contrast to cultures that place a higher value on social connections as a fundamental part of religious culture such as Judaism, Catholicism, and Hinduism. Judaism is classified as a religion of *descent*, one that emphasizes the family of origin and cultural rituals. Protestantism, on the other hand, may be classified as a religion of *assent*, one that emphasizes a belief system compelled by one's internal motivation to become part of a faith group.

Cohen and Hill (2007) find that Protestants are significantly more intrinsically motivated in their religious identity, followed by Catholics, then Jews. On a scale of how important their religious identity was to them, Protestants scored highest, followed by Catholics, then Jews. Cohen and Hill note that there is limited research on the processes related to the religious and spiritual identity among those who claim to be religious or spiritual (Cohen & Hill, 2007). The present study sought to inform Cohen and Hill's theory of religion as culture by exploring the experiences that led self-identified born again Christian college students to convert to Christianity. Related to this theory, how did these students assent to their belief system and what factors led to this process?

The Nature of Religious Conversion

Many of those who have conversion experiences see regeneration as the first step in a long process of transformation (Kahn & Greene, 2004). However, such beliefs are much more common among those who convert to non-Christian religions rather than to evangelical Protestant sects. What one commits to is not necessarily correlated with the strength of commitment. For example, research has shown equal levels of commitment among different types of believers. Though their commitments are widely divergent,

the strength of evangelical Protestants' commitment and surrender to Jesus was shown to be just as strong as Unitarians' commitment to their community without creeds or requirements (Kahn & Greene, 2004).

What leads to regeneration. Research on what leads to spiritual or religious change points to several catalytic factors. Half of those who report some sort of conversion experience mention a religious activity such as going to church, a retreat, praying with others, or something of that sort (Smith, 2006). Half also mention that they had a personal problem that preceded their conversion such as an illness, accident, or death of someone special. Most people do not have a distinct moment or event of religious transformation like Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Just over a third report a consequence of their change as being closer to God, being more spiritual, dedicating their life to God or Christ, and engaging or reengaging their faith. Some report improvement in their behavior and/or character. Still others have an improved outlook on life (Smith, 2006). A qualitative study of adult women found that though they understood conversion to be transformative, they viewed conversion as a process rather than a single event, demonstrated through behavior, and different from being saved (Lee, 2008).

The purpose of this study was exploratory in nature, designed to investigate the pathways to the spiritual regeneration experience among born again Christians. How does one become a born again Christian? Are there common factors that precede such a conversion experience? Due to the exploratory, phenomenological nature of the research questions, we chose a qualitative, interview-based method.

Method

Participants. Participants in this study responded to an invitation for people who were "Born Again Christians," who were undergraduate students, and who were from 18 to 25 years of age. Students attended a large public Midwest university in a state commonly referred to as being part of the "Bible belt." Volunteers included eleven females and seven males. Participants identified themselves as Baptist (8), Church of Christ (2), Latter Day Saints (1), Methodist (1), Non-denominational (5), and Presbyterian (1). Notably, all of these groups except for the Latter Day Saints are part of a group traditionally classified as Protestant. All participants except one identified their race as White or Caucasian; the remaining participant identified as a Pacific Islander. Several methods were used to recruit participants including an advertisement on Facebook, announcements at meetings of multiple Christian student organizations, snowball sampling, emails from members of a campus Christian faculty group to students they knew who might meet the criteria for our study, referrals from local pastors in town, and participants from a research pool of human subjects taking coursework in Educational Psychology.

Procedure. Participants were interviewed one-on-one with one of the authors from this study in a private conference room or office. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder

and were then transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted over the course of two academic semesters. In order to protect participant confidentiality, only one experimenter served as a contact person for the participants. Participants did not provide their names to interviewers. Instead, they provided a self-selected pseudonym to be used throughout the study. Recordings and transcriptions were kept under lock and key. Participants were informed about all of these procedures at the beginning of their interview. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Guided by a process outlined by Cresswell (2006), the authors of the study met every other week for constant comparison, to compare field notes from interviews, begin to identify emergent themes, share insights, and assess for when the point of redundancy and saturation was reached. When we reached 18 interviews, we determined this point had been reached and concluded our interview process.

In keeping with recommendations by Aten and Hernandez (2008), steps were taken to ensure credibility and rigor. To protect the validity of our findings, multiple researchers collaborated on this project. Although all four authors are self-identified born again Christians, each represents a different denominational background, providing some diversity of perspective and validity safeguards. Finally, we consciously worked to preserve the integrity of the participants' stories.

Results

Participants were asked a series of questions designed to uncover what led to their taking on the identity of being born again. Responses fell into three overarching themes. First, participants described *exposure within relationships* to God's principles. These relationships were with a variety of individuals who were either already close to them and/or within religious organizations (e.g., church, campus ministries, church and youth camps). Second, participants noted the influence of *introspection and reflection* on their life without the influence of God. Third, there was an *active response* on the part of our participants in which they reported such things as recognizing that they were being convicted by the Holy Spirit, that they decided to act on that conviction, and that they took action to follow Jesus. Each theme, supported by participant quotes, is presented below with discussion following.

Exposure within relationships. Many participants reported that others who held significant roles in their lives were critical in either providing or supporting the spiritual guidance that led them to claim a born again identity. An overwhelming majority of students discussed in great detail how they grew up in God-centered homes with believing parents who had personal relationships with God, took them to church, and when they were ready, walked them through the salvation process. For example, when asked what led to her conversion, Susie noted:

Um, I was born in a Christian family, pretty much grew up in the church. And, um, I just felt like something was missing, and um, I prayed about it a lot with my... with my grandma. I was very close to her. And, um, she kind of told me, you know, the steps that needed to be taken. And I just prayed about it, and accepted God as my savior.

Other participants reported many other critical relationships as being key including pastors, Sunday school teachers, youth pastors, campus ministers, friends, and siblings. Each of these individuals provided an example to our participants of God working in their lives and led these participants to Him. For example, Samantha reported:

I have an older brother that's two years older than me, and he became a Christian before I did, and I noticed the differences in his life, and so I asked him about it and he told me that he had been born again, but I didn't understand what that meant, so I went and talked to my parents about it and they explained it to me more, and I prayed and asked Jesus into my heart.

The influence of family in combination with a church, both encouraging conversion, emerged as a powerful catalyst for many participants. Heidi described a young life growing up in a Christian home with Christian parents. She noted:

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I've always heard about Christ, just from my parents, and going to church, going to AWANA or Sunday school... all that kind of stuff. So we were having a family story time, basically, about Jesus and stuff like that, so that was the circumstance of when, like, I finally understood that I needed Christ in my life.

Hayden echoed this theme, stating:

I was raised in church, um, my family took me since I was born, um physically, but I made that decision when I was 7 and um, there was this special speaker at our church at the time and he was kind of like a kid speaker and so like, the way that he put it, he put it in terms that I understood and it was just like a tugging on my heart and I just felt like that was what God was wanting me to do and so I went to the front and prayed and talked to my parents about it and things like that.

A key element of being exposed to biblical truths involved organizational entities in which scriptural messages were delivered. Specifically, churches, summer camps, and campus parachurch organizations provided a vehicle through which participants were exposed to teachings that led to their conversion. For example, Sarai noted that she attended a conference in the eighth grade:

The speaker was just talking and basically said that if you are embracing some sin as ok and some as not, you are still a sinner and you are still separate from God. Then I realized that I was like, “Oh, ok, well, I’m not as good as I think I am.”

Likewise, Peter described two people who were important in his conversion experience:

(My roommate was) someone who just modeled the idea of what a Christian should be. Just what it looked like when somebody walks with Jesus, who just displays what Christ should be. That was really impactful. Then, there was a guy at the BCM (Baptist Campus Ministry) that kind of took me aside and taught me things from the Bible, so this is who God is; this is what Jesus looked like. I think that had a tremendous impact... they were very patient with me, very kind, because they knew what needed to happen, but they were very gentle with how they approached me.

Peter’s statement reflects his belief that through these key relationships God was using others to reach him. He noted the characters of the Christian men he was exposed to as possessing the qualities that allowed him to open his heart to God.

Introspection and reflection. The second emergent theme in which students described their conversion process centered on introspection and reflection. The participants reported that after their exposure to God came a time in their lives when they looked inward—at the sin in their lives and the emptiness in their hearts without God. Many reported doing this at a young age while several others reported this during later developmental stages in their lives. Peter described this time as one in which God became “very real to me” and he “decided to follow Jesus.” This happened subsequent to an experience when he noted, “I just felt the conviction of God come upon me, and that’s when He (God) started to become very real to me. He showed me what I had become, and I didn’t like it.”

Jackson provided a poignant example of how he felt convicted by sin, influenced by Scripture, and helped by an influential person during his time of introspection:

I actually, one night, opened the Word, just at random, just at a loss, just at the bottom of everything, like Augustine, he kind of hit the same place and just opened the Bible, and just a passage convicted him and he was just trapped intellectually, spiritually, or whatever. I opened the Word, it was just a random passage, Jeremiah 3 at least to me at least, I’ve never read it. And the chapter is about Israel’s faithlessness and God’s call to repent, and it was talking about how Israel has worshipped idols and how they committed adultery against the Lord, and they committed adultery on every hill, on every high place and under every blade of grass and all that. And then the last chapter, the last verse I mean, says “and let us lie on our beds of shame,

and let our inequity cover us.” And, I was literally lying in bed, just having engaged in a night of sin, debauchery, and just kind of started crying and I think that’s the point when I recognized like, “Okay, I need help, I can’t do this by myself anymore” and I was willing to do whatever it took to be changed. And so I, I actually, began to, after that, the next day I decided to get help with some Christian counseling, and actually for the first time confessed all of my sins, my secret life of sin.

Some participants also reported that they had experienced some life-changing event or experience that served as a catalyst prompting their reflection on their lives and what was missing. For example, Maisie cited her brain surgery as influential. She shared:

I realized that there were so many things that were wrong in my life and there is only one thing that can be made right. And even though I make mistakes and stuff that, um, Christ will always be there for me. So even when other people can’t be; He will be there.

Tim described battling depression as an influential part of his introspection. He noted that before he was born again, he had many life circumstances that he was unable to handle until he made some changes:

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(I started) reading my Bible every day and asking for peace I was provided with peace so a lot of the decisions I have to make I don’t stress out now because I know everything is going to work out for the good of me because I love God.

An active response. The third theme that emerged from the data focused heavily on the participants’ active response after hearing God’s word from someone and recognizing that they needed God. This theme emphasized the moment of conversion for many of our participants, of their becoming born again. Participants discussed in great detail what they actually did. They described different practices such as walking to the front of the church during an “altar call,” praying the sinner’s prayer, and other activities that symbolized their volitional decision to pursue God. For example, Susie described her conversion process as following the “ABC” method, whereby she Admitted she was a sinner, Believed that Jesus Christ is God’s Son and that He came down to earth to die for our sins, and Committed her life to God through evangelism and living by the teaching of the Bible. In a similar way, Erin described her moment of conversion:

First I had to confess that Jesus Christ died for my sins and he was, he existed and he was the Son of God. And then I, it was whenever I was ten years old, and I had a lot of my friends were doing it, and pretty much that was at first what I was doing, but now I know because I fully believe that, like, that I am born-again ‘cause I believe and I do what it says, I do what the Bible says.

Many described the complexity of the conversion process by noting that introspection launched them toward the decision to actively pursue a personal relationship with God. The students considered their maturing process as a key factor in understanding themselves in their relationship with God. This maturity allowed them to see the essence of their lives, their struggles, and then to see how God was doing a work within them. They reported that this learning process was critical in their overall conversion process that led them to a deeper and more purposeful relationship with God. For example, Sara described the nature of the conversion process as one of understanding and commitment:

[It's] a process, I mean it's a, you have to know about God and know the Bible before you fully understand what you are doing and committing to, kind of like a marriage, and you are committing yourself to a religion and how you feel in your morals and values, so it's a process of how you believe plus the religion that you believe.

Following a period of introspection, Jackson noted the conviction he felt at an event:

They had an altar call thing, and I actually went up and I felt the Lord telling me to get on my knees and just pray, "Have mercy on me. I am a sinner." And that, I think at that conference, that was the point where, where I had ceded my rights, abdicated the throne of my heart to Jesus Christ.

Another participant, Sarai, described conversion in a way that separated the concepts of justification and sanctification (Grudem, 1994), without direct reference to either concept. She stated:

The actual being born again, was definitely a single event, because I do think that whenever you place your trust in Christ, that is an event that is a one-time decision. Um, but your growth in your relationship with Jesus is a process. Because I am definitely not in the same place that I was now, than I was my freshman year before high school. Um, so my growth and my development has definitely been a process but the actual me being born um, as a true believer in Jesus and walking with Jesus that was a one-time event thing.

In a similar way, Scout noted taking on the identity of being born again was a single event. "It was that prayer and that recognition of needing a Savior. But the process of growing as a born again Christian is definitely a process, that will happen at that point until I pass away."

Several other students reported that their growth process was directly influenced by their college experiences, the intense temptation, and the sin they experienced. One participant discussed how it was the college experience that tested her the most and limited her development but served as a major mechanism in her future ministry.

Discussion

We sought to determine whether born again Christian students have commonalities in their experiences pre-conversion and during their conversion processes. By interviewing 18 participants who identify as born again, we were able to illuminate the experiences of this population.

Our participants reported, almost universally, some *exposure within relationships* to the message of Jesus from an individual they either knew or who was part of a group to which they belonged. The combination of a family who encourages conversion and a church that does so emerged as a particularly powerful influence. For some people, it may be that a Christian family can prepare a future believer for the salvation message sent by churches, parachurch groups, and student development professionals that will later require a response. It may also be that the messages preached outside the home are reinforced in the home and are then acted upon, resulting in conversion.

Our second major finding was that after hearing about God, those who converted went through a time of *introspection and reflection* when they realized the depth of their sin. Participants who later converted reported a deep sense of conviction, realizing that they were lost without God. It was interesting to note that during this time of reflection, our participants were essentially alone with God. They looked to the Bible and to their own thoughts to come to their own conclusions.

Our third major finding is that participants had some *active response* to what they heard about God and to their period of reflection that then characterized their conversion. Some participants came forward to profess faith publicly during a church service, some prayed with others; in each case, a volitional activity was described.

Our results point to the central role of families, the church, parachurch organizations (e.g., Student Mobilization, Baptist Campus Ministry, InterVarsity), and student development staff at faith-based institutions, and their role in providing the conditions necessary for conversion to occur. Our findings suggest that a powerful combination is created when born again parents and a church or other organization with the same theology influences an individual.

Given the correlations of being born again with positive outcomes ranging from better relationships to decreased drug use (e.g., Adamczyk & Palmer, 2008; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006), the experiences of our participants suggest several implications of our findings for practicing pastors and spiritual educators. The experiences of our participants suggest that time sharing the message of God, particularly John 3:3 and other conversion narratives, is fruitful. Our participants also noted the influence of recognizing how far apart from God they were. This suggests that a well-timed message to people about the nature of sin and how it separates people from God is a necessary element in a conversion process. In addition, pastoral staff should endeavor to provide opportunities for students to make active decisions to profess faith and affirm a born again status, when they are ready. Our results also point to the serious need for supporting

parents who raise children. Ministries designed to help parents support the faith development of their children seem all the more important given the finding that so many of our participants grew up in homes with believing parents. These findings also highlight the importance of conducting outreach to support those who do not have the benefit of living in a home with born again parents.

Given the qualitative nature of our method, we note that our findings illuminate the experiences of our participants but cannot be generalized. However, this finding does open doors to new lines of research. For example, born again students could be asked to rate the influence of members of their family, their church, and relevant parachurch organizations on their conversion process using a Likert-style, quantitative measure. A regression could be used to determine which variables most strongly contribute to conversion and in what combination of influence.

One might also study the effects of having parents or churches that do not subscribe to a born again theology and how this impacts a larger population of students who identify as born again and those who do not. Our study was limited in the population that we recruited, born again Christians at a secular institution. Had we studied a group that included students who did not convert or students on a faith-based campus, we may well have had different findings.

Our study was also limited by the fact that all of the students came from one campus, in a cultural context where churchgoing and identifying oneself as Christian is normative as part of being in the “Bible belt” of the country. Had the study taken place on a campus in a different region with a different culture, it is likely that we would have heard different responses from our participants. In addition, racial diversity was represented by only one of our 18 respondents, despite the fact that the population on this campus includes 19% minority students. Thus, Caucasian students are substantially overrepresented in our sample.

Our study confirmed the validity of Cohen and Hill’s (2007) theory of religion as culture with a population who identify as born again. Cohen and Hill (2007) suggest that Protestants focus on the relationship between the individual and God, not mediated by the Church. Our second theme was consistent with this theory, in that our participants reported taking time for introspection and reflection with God prior to their conversion. This time came after contact with family and/or the church and before an active response where they expressed their faith. What is noteworthy is the individualistic nature of this introspection, much in line with how Cohen and Hill (2007) describe Protestants. Even our third theme of an active response is an individual decision rather than a corporate decision. Born again Christians constitute an important subset of Protestants, thus future research on this theory might ask whether or not participants are born again. Doing so could identify meaningful patterns in responses on important variables of interest.

Conclusion

We sought to determine whether there were identifiable catalytic factors that were influential in conversion experiences of born again Christians. From interviewing 18 college students who claim that identity, the most obvious powerful catalysts seem to be parents, role models in their church or other similar organization, and church-related programming. Pastoral staff, staff from parachurch organizations, older brothers and sisters, and others who role model being born again were highly influential. A less obvious facilitator of spiritual growth was time for reflection and introspection on a life without God. Some of our participants had to reach low points to spur this reflection. Still, this time to reflect appeared important. Finally, it seems important that in order to be born again, many of our participants needed the opportunity for a place to make their active response. This could be a church where there is an opportunity to affirm their belief, attending a faith-based institution, an altar call at a religious gathering, or an event by a ministry where students come to realize that they are broken and respond by crying out for a savior. Further clarification of the nature and functioning of these catalysts will help researchers and practitioners further understand the complex process of becoming born again.

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