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# How to be (the Author of) *Born Again*: Charles Colson and the Writing of Conversion in the Age of Evangelicalism

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**Abstract:** Charles Colson’s *Born Again* was the most celebrated spiritual memoir of the 1970s evangelical revival, and remains the best-known book-length conversion narrative of the twentieth century. Its account of how Colson—notoriously ruthless as a political aide to President Nixon—abruptly invited Christ into his life in the late summer of 1973 following a long searching discussion with a Christian friend and of how he came to submit himself completely to God’s will, inspired evangelicals to hope that the broader national crisis of morals exemplified by Watergate might be purged by the fires of revival. Colson went on, as founder of the world’s largest prison ministry and as a leading evangelical thinker and writer, to place a highly-structured model of conversion at the centre of his ambitions for evangelical mission in the world. However, as revealed by his private papers, Colson’s own conversion experience was more complex and ambiguous than either his published memoir or later works of advocacy suggest. His editor, Leonard LeSourd, played a significant role in shaping *Born Again* to match the conceptual norms of popular evangelicalism and contribute the force of a recent, conspicuous and apparently secure example of individual spiritual rebirth to the wider evangelical project of religious revival.

**Keywords:** Charles Colson; *Born Again*; conversion; sanctification; evangelical; Leonard LeSourd; American evangelicalism; Prison Fellowship

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## 1. Introduction

*Born Again*, a memoir written by Charles Colson, disgraced former Special Counsel to disgraced former President Richard Nixon, was published on 18 February 1976. Ten days later, in Wayland,

Massachusetts, G. Alan Steuber finished reading the book and sat down to write a letter to its author. Steuber described himself as a successful “mid-forties guy”, blessed with a loving wife and “three bright, healthy, straight-arrow children”. However, he told Colson, he was also perplexed, unhappy, and afraid that he was losing his grip: “I have gotten up in the middle of the night to stare across an empty living room consumed with anger toward my ‘enemies’ and planned how to manipulate and maneuver, as well as to ponder how I am being manipulated and maneuvered. Something terribly important is lacking in my life.” [1].

Steuber explained that initially he had been reluctant to read *Born Again*, which described Colson’s fall from the commanding heights of national power to a bunk bed in a federal prison dormitory and also, contemporaneously, his experience of a climb to spiritual grace as a result of converting to Christianity in the late summer of 1973. A life-long Republican, Steuber felt betrayed by Richard Nixon, and he had been “skeptical, at the very least”, about Colson’s conversion. Previously, he had tried reading Norman Vincent Peale, listening to Billy Graham and studying the Bible, but nothing had touched him: “I couldn’t relate. These people were different. They were ‘good’ people whose faith was simple, unshakable. They accepted, as self-evident, things which I could not.” Leafing through *Born Again*, however, Steuber “quickly found myself so engrossed that I stayed up half the night reading it”. In particular, he identified with the “misguided pride of accomplishment” that Colson confessed to in the book. He wrote: “I have never before felt such empathy or been moved to such emotion on the subject of faith and Christ. I cried. I couldn’t stop the tears which so many of the incidents you related brought to my eyes.” Finally, he had prayed. Steuber concluded his letter by declaring: “I desperately wish to be Born Again.”

Colson later recorded that, in the spring of 1976, mail from readers of *Born Again* began arriving daily at his home “in stacks, often 40 to 50 letters banded together” [2]. Many of the letters, like Alan Steuber’s, testified to the changes that reading Colson’s story had wrought in individual lives. Across American evangelical culture writ large, *Born Again* was a phenomenon. After Colson spoke at a National Prayer Breakfast engagement in January, one report observed, advance copies of the book were “grabbed up” by those attending, “and he spent an hour signing autographs” [3,4]. The first printing of 40,000 sold out before the official date of publication ([2], p. 92). By May, with 175,000 sales, *Born Again* was second in the best selling list of *Christian Bookseller Magazine* [5]. Half a million hardback copies had been sold by the fall, when a paperback edition was released [6]. In November, in a survey of more than one hundred Christian leaders, it was named the most significant evangelical book of the year, receiving more votes than any other title in the eighteen-year history of the poll [7]. *Born Again*’s commercial and critical success did much to resuscitate the genre of spiritual autobiography [8], with Colson himself endorsing the conversion narratives of Eldridge Cleaver [9] and another convicted Nixon aide, Jeb Stuart Magruder [10]. In 1979, the memoir of Colson’s early spiritual mentor, former U.S. Senator Harold Hughes, which described Hughes’s long battle with alcoholism, his dramatic religious transformation and his subsequent political career, was advertised as the “companion volume” to *Born Again* [11]. Meanwhile, Billy Graham had brought out his own best-selling self-help manual for conversion entitled—with more than a nod in the direction of Colson’s book—*How to Be Born Again* [12]. According to Virginia Lieson Brereton, *Born Again* is probably the best known book-length conversion narrative of the twentieth century [13].

In December 1973, when the press first learned that Colson had become a Christian, the *Boston Globe* commented that, against a national pattern of declining church attendance, “new conversions such as Colson appear eccentric and without explanation” [14]. Six months later, after his sentencing hearing at the Federal Courthouse in Washington, D.C., Colson told reporters: “I have committed my life to Jesus Christ and I can work for Him in prison as well as out.” [15]. “To the large segment of society that has just about snapped free of the religious roots that once went deep in American life” observed the *New York Times*, Colson’s words “sounded unreal”. It went on to provide its readers with a brief guide to the scriptural basis for the evangelical belief in the need for rebirth [16]. Over the course of 1976, however, the themes of evangelical religion became more familiar to more Americans, thinning the taint of eccentricity and anachronism. This was not solely a result of the publication of *Born Again*. The language of spiritual renewal acquired a striking salience in the year of the nation’s bicentennial and the first presidential election following the iniquities of Watergate. In March, during his campaign for the North Carolina Democratic primary, Jimmy Carter informed a fund-raising reception in Winston-Salem that, nine years previously, he had undergone “a deeply profound religious experience that changed my life dramatically”. The next morning, asked by reporters to elaborate on his remarks, Carter commented that he had “formed a very close, intimate personal relationship with God through Christ, that has given me a great deal of peace, equanimity and the ability to accept difficulty without unnecessarily being disturbed, and also an inclination on a continuing basis to ask God’s guidance in my life” [17,18].

When Carter went on to win the primary with a clear majority, confirming his status as front-runner in the race for the Democratic nomination, it prompted the media to reckon anew with the entanglements of politics and religion. Throughout the rest of the primary season and his subsequent presidential campaign, Carter was asked and spoke often about how, if elected, his religious beliefs would influence the way he would govern [19,20]. Meanwhile, the press tried to assess the actual reach of evangelical faith throughout the country. In August, a Gallup survey revealed that 35 percent of Americans claimed to be “born-again” or to have had a “born again” experience in which they committed themselves to Christ [21]. In October, taking their cue from the Gallup results, both *Christianity Today* and *Newsweek* declared 1976 to be the “year of the evangelical” [22,23]. Titled “Born Again!”, *Newsweek*’s story was liberally decorated with snapshots of evangelical conversion culture at its most expressive: of the blessing of a new believer through the laying on of hands, of a preacher, mid-exhortation, his open bible thrust forward, of an immersive living water baptism, of congregants at prayer, eyes closed and arms aloft either in praise or supplication. Jimmy Carter himself, having helped to inspire public interest in the phenomena of spiritual rebirth, actually remained rather reticent on the subject of his own transformation, emphasizing instead what the experience had not involved: “It wasn’t a voice of God from heaven. It was not anything of that kind. It wasn’t mysterious.” [17]. Carter’s account of his conversion was akin to an executive summary, carefully edited to excise dramatic details and any trace of emotional incontinence. Its purpose was very different from that of the standard evangelical conversion narrative, which is defined by the intent itself to convert, to propagate the kingdom of the faithful by persuading unconverted readers and listeners of their own need for redemption ([13], pp. 3–5). In 1976, the most conspicuous source for such a narrative was not Carter’s campaign discourse but Charles Colson’s *Born Again*.

The evangelical emphasis on conversion, therefore, had a new visibility in the national culture, and according to *Christianity Today*, the “spiritual turn-round” of Charles Colson was “exhibit A” ([22], p. 13). In an article for the *New York Times Magazine*, Garry Wills agreed. Evangelicals, he asserted, had invested a good deal of faith in Richard Nixon, and so Watergate had been “a great psychic blow”. But Colson’s spiritual rebirth had afforded them fresh hope, for it transformed Watergate from a source of disillusionment into a lesson and a promise, consistent with the ideal types of evangelical tradition. If Colson—political hard man par exemplar, master of dirty tricks—could change, what sinner could not, particularly if they were confronted with the forceful witness of Colson himself? “He who has sinned greatly”, Wills noted, “gives the most impressive testimony to the Spirit’s redeeming power.” Colson, then, was a “literal godsend” for evangelicals, and *Born Again*—with its account of how he came to Christ—quickly assumed the status of a canonical text. For evangelicals, Wills observed, “the exact moment when he broke into tears, sitting one night in his car, has entered the history of ‘tolle, lege’ (‘take up and read’) great conversions.” Wills continued: “Some serious people actually see in it the harbinger of a new Great Awakening, a ‘sign of the times’ (which evangelicals always look for).” [24].

The purpose of this essay is to explore the relation of mutual shaping between Colson’s celebrated spiritual memoir and the theories and theatre of evangelical conversion culture in the United States as the nation entered—in Steven Miller’s phrase—its “Born-Again Years” [20]. Over the past decade, there has been a marked revival of interest in the history of post-war evangelicalism. Scholars have produced detailed and insightful studies of the role played by evangelicals in effecting the transformation of national and regional politics [19,25–28], mass-market retailing [29], campus religion [30], and suburban youth culture [31]. Whilst these historians have tended to open their accounts in the immediate post-war decade—the “year of the evangelical” had a lengthy and complex gestation, absorbing in the process a surprising measure of genetic material from the countercultural 1960s—they usually also identify 1976 as the moment when the trends of institutional growth, proto-political values campaigning, and end-times excitement came together to draw attention to evangelicalism as a distinct and sizable socio-cultural phenomenon. However, there have been no comprehensive studies of the discourse of evangelical conversion in this period, though an emphasis upon the necessity of conversion is generally accepted as one of the principal defining features of evangelical religion [32]. In their accounts of evangelicalism in the 1970s, historians frequently comment on the bull market for celebrity conversion stories—from an eclectic mix of radical politicians, athletes, musicians and pornographers—as the decade neared its close ([20], pp. 21–22; [27], p. 365). However, first-hand accounts of these conversions, a good many of which were published, have rarely been the objects of sustained historical exegesis. It is unclear what this neglect should be attributed to: a residual deference of the critical mind towards an encounter with the transcendent or, in stark contrast, a presumption that such texts are too generic and mediocre in their content to reward prolonged review.

Even Colson’s *Born Again*—the most widely-read conversion narrative of the 1970s evangelical revival—remains understudied. Only a single scholarly article, its conclusions grounded almost exclusively in a hermeneutical analysis of the published text, has attended to the task of explaining *Born Again*’s success [33]. According to Charles Griffin, the book incorporated two strategies of narrative form—the syllogistic and the qualitative—which combined to make Colson’s account of his conversion “coherent and believable”. The struggle between Colson’s pride in his worldly accomplishments and his need as a Christian to be humble before God provided *Born Again* with its “unifying logic”, whilst the

deepening contrast between the descriptions of Colson's outward circumstances (criminal indictment, prison, disgrace) resulting from his past behaviour and those of his inner moods (spiritual contentment and joy) attested to the value of his new life in the making.

It is true that the structure and language of *Born Again* mattered. The success of Colson's memoir was not pre-ordained. The integration of an insider account of the still-rumbling moral crisis of Watergate with the redeeming tropes of spiritual autobiography might easily have been done poorly, resulting in the book's commercial demise. To those who had been cynical when Colson had first declared himself transformed—liberal commentator Richard Goodwin called the story “a supreme con” [34]—the news that he was writing a conversion narrative was not sufficient in itself to warrant a revised view: it was just the sort of ploy old Colson might have tried in an effort to return himself to the centre of events. If readers were to be persuaded that Colson was indeed a new man, *Born Again* had some serious work to do.

The success of *Born Again* would not be secured by internal coherence alone; indeed, Griffin overstates the stability of its resolutions. Few converts write their memoirs in a cork-lined vacuum, and few readers open such texts with no expectations in mind. As a form, the conversion narrative is enthralled by precedent and disciplined by theology. However, it also has to negotiate ambiguities in its own tradition: between the writing of conversion as a primal spectacle, its essence expressed in a decisive, dramatic encounter with Christ, and the procedural variations endorsed by evangelical theologians, which value the convert's subsequent progress towards sanctification more highly than the theatre of their initial conversion experience. It is common for evangelical memoirs to incorporate an abrupt incidence of epiphany within a more extensive chronicle of personal spiritual education, but the relative emphasis given to event and process is not uniform across the genre. These differences invite historical study. By the mid-1970s, the older theological models may have been less salient to evangelical conversion discourse than the desire of evangelicals to promote religious revival as the only sure solution for a country in moral crisis. It was easier to speed the course of the revival by advertising the redemption that was accessible in an instance of decision than by itemizing the spiritual labours that converts would have to undertake thereafter in order to fully become new creatures in Christ.

There is a certain poetic coincidence in the celebrity of *Born Again* just at the moment when, in the field of literary studies, humanist approaches that affirmed the capacity of autobiography to give meaningful expression to a secure and unified self were yielding to the challenge of deconstructionism, which held the autobiographical self to be a hallucination conjured by language [35]. As he started to write his memoir, Colson also started to doubt the status of his own conversion as an accomplished narratable fact; he considered it to be, like the memoir, a work in progress. In some respects, Colson's new understanding of conversion as necessarily open-ended conforms to the conclusions of sociological studies in which biographical reconstruction has been found to be the exemplary activity of the religious convert: the godless past is ever plastic to the needs of the god-filled present. It also reflected Colson's increasing apprehension that the criteria used by the evangelical revival to evidence its own success measured little more than crowd sensations of cheap and fleeting grace. He believed that the claim of a convert that he or she had committed themselves to God should be subject to continual testing by the rigours of the truly religious life; thus, their status as a convert would always be provisional, contingent on the present and the future, not just on the past experiences that first produced their change of heart. However, Colson was not himself immune to the suasions of a literary marketplace that wanted its conversion narratives wrapped up and brightly ribboned. His editor Leonard LeSourd

constantly reminded him that, if it was to appeal to a wide audience, *Born Again* had to tell a story—and that story, moreover, had to have a happy ending. Colson deferred to LeSourd's advice. Although traces of Colson's conflicted, mutable self can still be identified in the final published text, *Born Again* was widely received as an account of a conversion complete both in time and in the author's experience of grace.

If *Born Again* was indeed the definitive text of the evangelical revival, its complexities merit close examination. Indeed, Colson's conception of the action of conversion, and of conversion's significance in the construction of an evangelical life, went on to evolve in consequential ways. Over the next three decades, through his work in prisons, Colson developed into a leading evangelical policy entrepreneur; his writings and radio broadcasts also made his views ubiquitous throughout middlebrow evangelical culture. Although he continued to observe that the experience of spiritual rebirth, in and of itself, was not a sufficient basis for the saving of a soul—and that, moreover, it was not the only possible route of entry into the kingdom of heaven—Colson, nevertheless, came to place great emphasis on the role to be played by conversion in what he envisioned as a global project of Christianization—as the grounding, alongside the Bible, for a distinct, self-confident evangelical mindset and as an alternative to the failed ameliorative reflexes of secular social policy. Once upon a time, as he was writing *Born Again*, Colson had not been certain that he could trust the affections of the heart. Later, as he endeavored to engineer a complete evangelical system of thought and deed, he would present those affections as foundational. In the post-war era, American evangelical conversion discourse was neither entirely individuated nor entirely generic and invariable: its transformations serve as important markers to the progress of evangelical ambitions in and for the world.

## 2. Scenes of Conversion in *Born Again*

The scene that Garry Wills regarded as having entered the canon of Christian conversion narratives is described in *Born Again* as the culmination of an evening at the home of Tom Phillips, President of the leading defense manufacturer Raytheon and a recent convert to Christ. During his conversation with Phillips, Colson finds himself convicted, and convicts himself, of the sin of pride; chastened, acutely conscious of his own inauthenticity, he is encouraged by Phillips to place his trust in God. Finally, alone in his car, his face cupped in his hands, his head against the steering wheel, tears flowing down his cheeks, Colson starts to pray, repeating “over and over the words: *Take me*”. The account of the evening—in chapter 8 of *Born Again*—is a sophisticated piece of writing, employing a range of narrative devices in order to convince its readers that the change the occasion effects in Colson is genuine ([15], pp. 118–28). It is rich in realistic detail, in the significations of time and place. Colson arrives at Phillips' “big white clapboard Colonial home” around eight p.m. It is “a grey overcast evening”, so humid that Phillips insists that Colson take off his jacket and tie. The two men retire to “a screened-in porch at the far end of the house”, Phillips pulling up “a wrought-iron ottoman”, Colson sitting on a “comfortable outdoor settee”. As they talk, fireflies flit through the “mauve dusk” outside. Later, when Colson leaves Phillips' driveway and, teary-eyed, halts his car by the roadside a short distance away, the tyres sink “into soft mounds of pine needles”. Much of the encounter with Phillips is conveyed in dialogue. For the reader, it is almost as if the evening is happening in real time.

One of the challenges of conversion literature is to describe radical discontinuity in a way that maintains a sense of narrative logic ([33], p. 152). Colson does not enter Phillips' house entirely unprepared for the conversation that ensues. He already knows about and is intrigued by Phillips' conversion. At a meeting in Raytheon's offices a few months before, Phillips had declared his commitment to Christ, saying: "I'd like to tell you the whole story some day, Chuck. I had gotten to the point where I didn't think my life was worth anything. Now everything is changed—attitude, values, the whole bit." Colson was startled, but he records that Phillips had "struck a raw nerve—the empty life. It was what I was living with, though I couldn't admit that to Tom" ([15], pp. 100–01). But, toward the end of a "long hot summer", Colson was finally ready to talk: the media had alleged his involvement in illegal activities, including bugging and burglary; prosecutors had launched an exhaustive investigation of his role. Colson writes: "I thought often of Tom's words during this stormy time; even more often I recalled the expression on his face, something radiant, peaceful, and very real. I envied it, whatever it was." ([15], p. 117).

At this point, on the threshold of Phillips' home, Colson the protagonist is in crisis: he is attracted to Phillips' serenity, but he still has some distance to travel before, alone in his car, he can pray tearfully to God. Over the course of chapter 8, Colson the author had not only to describe that critical change, but account for it too, so that for his readers the scene had the ring of psychological truth. The chapter begins with an indication of Colson's inauthenticity: parking the car on Phillips' driveway, he feels "a touch of guilt" for not telling his wife the truth about why he was going out that evening. In contrast, the house he enters—awkwardly, through the kitchen door—is a happy family home. Tom Phillips has been playing tennis with his children, "two tanned, handsome young people". Gert, Phillips' wife, is clearing up after supper: "Supper", Colson notes, "Such an unpretentious New England word". Despite her husband's status in the corporate world, Gert has no airs, reminding Colson "of a favourite aunt we used to visit in the country when I was a boy, who always wore an apron, smelled of freshly made bread and cookies, and had the gift of making everyone feel at home in her kitchen". This house is a place where good lives are being led.

The narration closes in. On the screened-in porch, the humidity is "like a heavy blanket". Talking about his conversion, Phillips leans towards Colson: "Though his face was shaded, I could see his eyes begin to glisten and his voice became softer". The scene is part seduction, part prosecution. Again leaning close, "his hands stretched forward almost as if he was trying to reach out for me", Phillips criticizes the Nixon White House for its determination to destroy its enemies. Colson wipes away drops of perspiration from his lips. Phillips declares: "If you had put your faith in God, and if your cause were just, He would have guided you." He reads Colson a chapter from C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, describing the sin of pride: "As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." In Lewis' words, Colson recognizes himself: "I felt naked and unclean, my bravado defences gone." He sees the principal events in his life "paraded before me as if projected on a screen", as performances directed towards the goal of status and power. However, such a parade of images, as Colson notes, is also supposed to happen to a man about to die, and certainly he knows himself to have been wounded: "That one chapter ripped through the protective armour in which I had unknowingly encased myself for forty-two years." He had not known God because, as a prideful man, he could not. Then Phillips prays, and Colson sees how it is done: "It

sounded as if Tom were speaking directly and personally to God, almost as if He were sitting beside us.” Colson fight back tears. Still too self-conscious to pray himself, he takes his leave, but in his car the tears return. “I began to experience a wonderful feeling of being released. Then came the strange sensation that water was not only running down my cheeks, but surging through my whole body as well, cleansing and cooling as it went. They weren’t tears of sadness and remorse, nor of joy—but somehow, tears of relief.” Finally Colson prays. It is “my first real prayer”.

*Born Again*’s account of Colson’s meeting with Phillips combines situational realism, a credible intellectual catalyst (in the form of Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*) and a carefully plotted sequence of emotional steps and turns that cumulatively serve to make plausible the author’s passage from an embattled, inauthentic condition of being to a state of mind in which he can begin to express his need for a personal relationship with God. The reader is left in little doubt that, in Colson the protagonist, an important change has occurred. But is it certain that the change amounts to an actual conversion? The water cleansing Colson’s body certainly evokes catharsis, but if it was also intended to symbolize a baptismal immersion, the metaphor seems premature. As Colson the author notes, “I had not ‘accepted’ Christ—I still didn’t know who He was.” ([15], p. 127). In the next chapter of *Born Again*, the morning after his encounter with Phillips, Colson and his wife travel to Maine for a week’s vacation. There, in a rented cottage by the sea, Colson seeks to tread away from the point of surrender, to submit his tearful, roadside decision to pray to God to a lawyerly test of logic and evidence. He sits down with a yellow notepad and a copy of *Mere Christianity* given to him by Phillips. After a few days of rumination, however, he finds himself returned to the threshold of a leap of faith. Lewis has convinced him that the decision to accept Christ cannot be parsed. Christ was either what he claimed to be—the Son of God—or he was a lunatic. There is no middle ground. So, early in the morning, five days after his encounter with Phillips, Colson sits alone staring at the churning sea, and makes his choice, saying: “Lord Jesus, I believe You. I accept You. Please come into my life. I commit it to You.” With those words, he experiences a powerful sensation of serenity and assurance: “I felt old fears, tensions, and animosities draining away. I was coming alive to things I’d never seen before; as if God was filling the barren void I’d known for so many months, filling it to its brim with a whole new kind of awareness.” ([15], p. 142).

By the end of his week in Maine, then, Colson’s conversion is apparently complete: he has committed himself to God and perceives that God has responded in the form of a gift of Christian sensibility. Yet *Born Again*, as it continues, seems to qualify the status of that conversion as a final and accomplished fact. Over the second half of the book, Colson’s conversion is recast as an iterative process. Colson is presented with a series of challenges, each of which involves a test of his faith but also, if successfully resolved, an opportunity for further spiritual growth. Each resolution, however, inaugurates a fresh challenge. By the late spring of 1974, for example, Colson is feeling the need for another act of cleansing. He has been indicted for conspiracy and the obstruction of justice, and though he considers himself technically innocent of the charges, his conscience is far from clear. Reading the recently released transcripts of taped White House conversations has brought home to him the poisonous partisan political culture that pervaded the Nixon administration and the extent of his own complicity with it. Moreover, the effort of sustaining a legal defense of his conduct prior to his entry into faith seems increasingly irreconcilable with his desire to develop as a new man in Christ. He decides that he



must account for the sins of the old Colson. He pleads guilty to a charge of obstructing justice. Colson knows there is a realistic chance the judge will send him to jail ([15], pp. 231–45).

A few months later, as he duly serves time at Maxwell Federal Prison Camp in Alabama, Colson is living in fear—not just of physical harm (he has heard that an inmate has threatened to kill him), but also of succumbing to the same anomie of incarceration that he observes in much of the prison’s population. He confesses to a weakening of faith. Then, however, he turns to scripture, and finds new purpose in the injunction to think of all men as his brothers. God is telling him, he concludes, to minister to his fellow inmates, and he begins to do so ([15], pp. 300–10). Within weeks, the mood in the prison is transformed ([15], p. 360). However, swiftly thereafter Colson is forced to leave his work at Maxwell when he is transferred back to Fort Holabird, a small prison facility near Baltimore where he had begun his sentence. He is held there alongside the other convicted Nixon aides—John Dean, Herb Kalmbach, and Jeb Magruder—to testify in the trial of the chief Watergate conspirators, Bob Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, and John Mitchell. Once the trial jury retires, Dean, Kalmbach and Magruder are all released, but Colson remains in custody. He also learns that the Commonwealth of Virginia has barred him from returning to legal practice and that his son Christian has been arrested for possession of marijuana. Colson is in despair. He knows the scriptural command to praise God “no matter what, but alone by my bunk that cold, bleak January night I simply couldn’t bring myself to do it” ([15], p. 368). Then the culminating act in the spiritual odyssey described in *Born Again* occurs: not Colson’s release from prison, though that is to follow within a week, but a phone call from Congressman Al Quie, one of his spiritual mentors in Washington. Quie has heard of an old statute that would allow him to serve in Colson’s place for whatever remains of his sentence. Colson refuses the offer, but he realizes, more than ever before, the power of God’s love as manifested in the caring of his friends. Finally he makes his “total surrender”, thanking God for all he has endured, for it has allowed him to come to such a precious understanding: “This was the real mountaintop experience. Above and around me the world was filled with joy and love and beauty. For the first time I felt truly free, even as the fortunes of my life seemed at their lowest ebb.” ([15], p. 370).

Alan Steuber had started reading *Born Again* when his wife brought a copy home from her weekly bible class. It had been loaned to her by Gert Phillips who, living nearby, also attended the class. This connection might have encouraged him to emphasize the significance of Colson’s experience on the road after his visit to the Phillips’ home. After all, as he told Colson, he had always assumed that conversion “must be a one-time, cataclysmic occurrence from which point forward a person has totally ‘different’ feelings, attitudes and behavior toward others”. But what he now understood as a result of reading *Born Again* was that such occurrences were “only awakenings”, that “acceptance of Christ and understanding of its meaning is a continuing growth experience” [1]. Colson was to publish an extract from Steuber’s letter in his second memoir, *Life Sentence*, which more explicitly develops the theme of conversion as a cyclical, open-ended process, involving periods of crisis as well as accumulations of Christian maturity ([2], pp. 121–22). In that book, he admits the provisionality of the spiritual affirmation described in the last pages of *Born Again*. Colson recounts how, after leaving prison, he was unsure what God wanted him to do. It took a number of months—and another epiphany—before he resumed his interest in prison ministry, and another year again before he committed to it full-time. “I was learning”, he observes, “that my nature followed a certain pattern: a period of intense spiritual enthusiasm,

then a flagging of zeal, soon followed by a resurgence of faith, then another falling away, and so on. We humans obviously have a problem maintaining a steady level of spiritual fidelity” ([2], p. 94).

### 3. Conversion Narratives in Evangelical Tradition

Through the intensity of its focus upon Colson’s meeting with Tom Phillips, *Born Again* made it likely that most readers would interpret Colson’s conversion as a definite, singular, accomplished event in time; but much of the rest of the book—as Steuber noted—actually sustains a different reading: of his conversion as a dynamic and episodic process. It has always been the peculiar challenge of autobiography that it seeks to encapsulate a life from inside that life as it continues to be lived—to present becoming as though it is being ([35], pp. 154–66). But *Born Again* also encompasses an ambiguity at the heart of evangelical tradition. The practice of spiritual autobiography had developed in the Protestant churches over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, partly as an alternative to the Catholic rite of confession and penance [36,37]. In New England, with the Reformers committed both to a restoration of the purity of the early church and to the concept of an unmediated relationship with God, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, with its account of Augustine’s conversion in a Milanese garden, became a highly influential text [38]. According to Perry Miller, the “moment of regeneration, in which God, out of His compassion, bestows grace upon man and in which man is enabled to reply with belief”, was the “single goal” of the New England strain of Augustinian piety ([38], p. 25). Indeed, in New England, it was usually only those who could convincingly describe their experience of the infusion of grace who were admitted to church membership [39]. In such testimonies, Edmund Morgan observed, the infusion is “not always so precisely felt that the believer can state exactly when and where it came to him” ([39], p. 91). However, many Puritan conversion narratives do identify a definite date and locale, and during later American revivals, this bias towards accounts of a sudden, dramatic encounter with the Holy Spirit became even more marked [40]. Charles Finney and other nineteenth-century evangelists rejected the notion that sinners had to await the discerning of a divine initiative in their lives before they were able to convert; each individual was free to receive God whenever they chose to do so, hence the promise of revival preaching [41]. Participants in the Boston Businessmen’s Revival of 1858, for example, enthusiastically embraced the prospect of immediate spiritual transformation; they flocked en masse to daily prayer meetings as well as regular church services, and at the height of the revival, conversions were said to be occurring at a rate of fifty thousand a week [42].

Religious conversion has continued to be widely regarded as synonymous with—or at least dependent upon—a “moment of regeneration”. According to the theologian Gordon T. Smith, the revivalist notion of conversion—“personal, emotional and decisive”—remained the standard model for American evangelicals throughout the twentieth century [43]. It was also consistent with the emphasis placed by the emerging discipline of psychology upon the self-fashioning potential of the human mind. In his pioneering work on the psychology of religious experience, William James defined conversion as the destruction of an old structure of mind and the creation in turn of a new self with religious ideas and objectives at its “habitual centre” [44]. Though the old structure may already have become brittle, James emphasized the need for “a sudden emotional shock, or an occasion which lays bare the organic alteration” to cause its final collapse and allow the mind to reconstitute itself in its new religious mode ([44],

pp. 177–78). Indeed, the more “instantaneous” the conversion, the more profound and complete it seemed to be. His conclusions, James noted, conformed closely to evangelical belief: “revivalism has always assumed that only its own type of religious experience can be perfect; you must first be nailed on the cross of natural despair and agony, and then in the twinkling of an eye be miraculously released.” ([44], p. 203).

Other authorities, however, have apprehended a significant difference between a conversion begun and a conversion completed. For the Puritans in New England, the experience of grace inaugurated, rather than concluded, an enduring battle with religious doubt: acutely conscious now of the depths of their sin, converts constantly questioned the condition of their souls and their status as members of the elect. Within this framework, spiritual anxiety actually constituted persuasive evidence of grace. Uncertain of his sanctification, the convert remained vigilant against sin and obedient to God ([36], pp. 32–36; [39], pp. 68–70; [45]). According to Patricia Caldwell, New England itself played a role in arresting the movement of conversion narratives towards completion. Conversions begun in the old world frequently seem to have been stalled by the migration to the colonies and the vicissitudes of existence there. Caldwell writes: “the failure of New England, of ‘state and country alike’, to meet the spiritual expectations of the individual who is trying to articulate his experience devolves back upon that person and presses him into a doubtful limbo of semiconversion or even nonconversion.” [46]. There is detectable in these narratives an “angle of vision” between religious hope and despair that was original to the New World ([46], p. 178). For Caldwell, they represent “the first faint murmurings of a truly American voice” ([46], p. 41). From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, as Virginia Lieson Brereton has observed, narrated conversions tended to lengthen in their course and become more complex in their psychology as a consequence of the increasing influence of Holiness teachings. Holiness was achieved when the convert—often after a prolonged and difficult struggle—had learned to surrender his or her will completely to God, their passage into the condition marked by the experience of a second, sanctifying work of grace. Brereton also notes that many Pentecostal conversion narratives extend the process of sanctification to include an additional experience: of a profound sensation of empowerment through “baptism in the Spirit” ([13], pp. 61–72). In his study of how modern American autobiographies have made use of conversion discourse, Peter A. Dorsey asserts that it is rather rare for such texts (which may describe secular as well as religious conversions) to be “structured around a single decisive event”. Instead, they tend to “contain a cyclic pattern of conversion and reconversion, as if the converted are predisposed to repeat and reinforce this fundamental experience over and over” ([36], p. 3). For none of these authors—Caldwell, Brereton and Dorsey—does the exemplary American mode of conversion begin and end cleanly in a single miracle of release.

The recognition that religious conversion frequently involves but is not necessarily confined to a particular catalytic experience has encouraged attempts to pattern its normative course in terms of a “morphology” or stage-model. Puritan authorities, Morgan asserts, so effectively defined and proselytised a standard sequence of stages—“knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect assurance”—that it was rare for the sequence not to be reprised in conversion narratives of the period ([39], pp. 72, 90–91). In the late twentieth century, sociologists interested in new religious movements and the evangelical revival sought to integrate James’ emphasis upon conversion as a psychological event with stage models that captured the process by which the convert progressively becomes socialized within his or her adopted community of faith [47–49]. The principal function of

such models was to categorize and sequence the social and psychological factors that funnelled an individual towards an ultimately stable state of religious conviction. That faith could be fitful, or that—as in the case of the Puritans—it might readily embrace confession of its own imperfection, was seldom acknowledged.

However, there has been a growing awareness amongst such researchers that the conversion accounts they use as evidence have a more complex relationship to the phenomena they describe than early studies tended to assume. In a review of the field of conversion research published in 1984, David Snow and Richard Machalek pointed to the challenge of depending empirically on such accounts, which were retrospective constructions subject to biographical reordering and social influence—in particular, by the doctrines and rhetorical practices of the churches, sects and movements to which the converts now belonged [50]. No conversion narrative could be taken as an entirely reliable record of how and why a conversion had occurred, but it could confirm the status of the convert by providing evidence of his or her “universe of discourse”. Snow and Machalek suggested that biographical reconstruction was a distinctive feature of convert self-expression: it actually confirmed the convert’s identity by hiding the true story of their conversion from view. You could tell the real convert by the manner in which they revised their past [50,51]. Drawing upon a sample of interviews with evangelical Christians, Clifford Staples and Armand Mauss developed this insight further, suggesting that biographical reconstruction had a functional as well as indicative significance: it was an instrument by which people who were immersed in the process of conversion endeavored to achieve that goal [52,53]. By reordering their former lives, they could clarify their future. Conversion narratives are thus constitutive of conversion itself. Indeed, it may be impossible to experience a conversion without narrating it, for it is generally by means of narrative that we comprehend and express the substance of the change that is occurring. The meaning inheres in the telling—to ourselves and to others; thereafter, it is recharged by telling the story anew. As Peter Stromberg observes in his analysis of evangelical conversion narratives, “a change in the believer’s life is sustained only to the extent that it is continually constituted”—and “change is constituted above all in talk” [54]. The true mark of the convert may not be an immaculately-rendered account of how they came to their faith; instability and incoherence, of the kind we can detect in Charles Colson’s *Born Again*, could be a better clue to the still-converting soul.

#### 4. Evangelicals and Conversion in the 1970s

As a literary form, therefore, evangelical spiritual autobiography had an unsettled inheritance: the tradition encouraged the narration of conversion as a once-in-a-lifetime event, but it also admitted accounts in which sensations of spiritual resolution were disclosed as premature and superficial and the final attainment of Christian maturity had to await the convert’s passage—often interrupted by back-sliding—through a sequence of profound challenges to their claims of new faith. Indeed, behind the effort to compose a conversion story may lie a desire to compose the soul, to distil meaning out of feeling, to discern a plot in on-going tumult. But the ambiguities of *Born Again* were not just determined by the complex traditions and properties of its form. By the end of the long sixties, the question of what constituted a conversion had assumed a striking new significance for American evangelicals. From their perspective, the nation had staggered out of that decade debauched and

dystopic; the crisis of values they diagnosed was deep enough to consume a conservative President. This was a nation in desperate need of Christ's transforming grace. There was good reason, then, for evangelicals to emphasize the ease with which such grace could be attained. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis had refined the essence of conversion down to a stark and simple decision: one has either to accept that Christ was what He said He was or else denounce him as "a lunatic, or something worse" [55]. Throughout the 1970s, Lewis's formulation featured in many widely-circulated works of evangelical apologetics, including Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* [56] and Billy Graham's *How to Be Born Again* [56]. "When I decide to be a Christian," Graham wrote, "I am deciding who Jesus Christ is. Trust in Him makes me a believer in Him and leads to being truly alive!" ([12], pp. 104–05). The convention that conversion consisted of an acute turn towards acceptance and faith was affirmed in a number of prominent spiritual memoirs of the era. Harold Hughes and Eldridge Cleaver both described life-changing instances of surrender as—at their lowest ebbs, each contemplating suicide—they experienced sudden, dramatic infusions of the Holy Spirit ([9], pp. 211–12; [11], pp. 98–99). Such accounts—with their exemplary descriptions of abrupt supernatural intervention—served to distinguish the evangelical mode of personal catharsis from the narcissistic tropes commonly detected in contemporary secular procedures of self-discovery and self-renewal [57,58]. They also licensed evangelicals in the seventies to entertain a precious hope: if the Lord had intervened to change a man like Cleaver, convicted criminal, racial radical and fugitive from justice, then a miracle of transformation remained available to all—and, despite its descent into decadence, to the nation as a whole.

However, there were also good reasons for evangelicals to resist the implication that the only conversions that mattered were those that occurred in an electric instance of encounter with Christ and to caution against prioritizing the phenomena of conversion over the other contents of a religious life. There were many committed Christians—Billy Graham and Malcolm Muggeridge amongst them—whose conversions had involved nothing like a light from heaven and the Lord's voice on the Damascan road [59,60]. Some conversions, according to Graham, might resemble "a tornado which alters the entire landscape", but he compared others—including his own—to a quiet, gentle breeze. Although Graham thought that most believers remembered a particular moment—peaceful or turbulent—when they had surrendered themselves to Christ, he acknowledged that this was not true of all. He offered the example of his wife, Ruth, who recalled no time in her life when she had not loved and trusted in Jesus ([12], pp. 165–67; [61]).

Evangelicals also recognized that the depth and durability of an individual's conversion was often contingent on factors other than the intrinsic drama of the conversion event, in particular the convert's access to a community of Christians who could sustain them in their new-found faith and encourage their further spiritual growth. This was why those who made decisions for Christ at Graham's crusades were quickly steered into the arms of local churches; it was why Charles Colson, in his first ventures in prison ministry, focused upon the seeding of inmate fellowship cells [62]. Colson knew from personal experience how easily an inmate's commitment to Christ could dissipate if he had no one to help him resist the torpidity and turpitude of the prison environment. In time, indeed, Colson's awareness of the contingency of conversion came to inform his public statements on the evangelical revival itself. Colson cautioned that future commentators might criticize evangelical preachers for dispensing nothing more than a cheap grace and for failing to adequately prepare their converts for the challenges and demands of the Christian life. As a result there was a danger that, finally confronted with those

demands, many new believers would drift away disillusioned [63]. Colson became interested in the famous distinction drawn by William Wilberforce between “professed” and “real” Christianity, the latter condition marked by sanctification—an attitude of utter submission to God [64]. “Much contemporary teaching and literature”, he observed, “pays no more than lip service to the real meaning of servanthood and commitment. ‘Love one another as I have loved you’, Christ commands. For him, that meant laying down his life; it can mean no less for us.” [65]. There was little substance to a conversion that cost the convert nothing: “The object of the Christian life, after all, is not spirituality, not the search for more experiences or for signals from heaven or warm deep feelings in our heart. It is to seek righteousness in the sight of God” [66].

## 5. Colson the Public Convert

If there existed in contemporary culture a perception that the authenticity of a conversion was commensurate to the intensity of catharsis and the immediate force of new conviction, this was at least partly the responsibility of Charles Colson himself. In his initial working outline for *Born Again*, Colson noted that, when his conversion first became news in December 1973, “it was portrayed as [a] miraculous complete & total transformation [sic.]” [67]. The passive voice misleads, for Colson and his friends had been the primary agents of that portrayal. In his interviews with reporters, Colson had emphasized the catalytic role played by Tom Phillips and the week spent in Maine [14,68]. He declared that he had discovered “a great inner serenity, a great relief in a sense, really a new life that, in a way, changes your whole attitude about why you’re here and what you’re doing while you’re here. And it’s a great thrill” [69]. There was no suggestion in his statements that his conversion was unfinished. This was probably consistent with Colson’s own understanding at the time. He had not yet registered a tension between his loyal service to the Nixon White House and the ethical demands of his faith. Indeed, Colson had come to nurture the hope that, through some alchemy of civil religion, the Watergate affair might be brought to a close with the Nixon Presidency still intact. He urged the President to ask Congress to proclaim a national day of prayer with the aim of healing the wounds of the current crisis by encouraging Americans to focus instead on their common relationship with God: “this would begin the reconciliation that would enable you to lead the country out of these troubled times.” [70].

Conscious, meanwhile, that Colson’s reputation as a cynical political operative might cause his profession of faith to be dismissed as just another tactical move in his on-going battle to evade ruin and disgrace, his religious mentors earnestly attested to his sincerity and to the measure of his change of heart. The most persuasive was Harold Hughes, for—as an avowed political opponent of the Nixon administration—he had no obvious motive, genuine conviction aside, to assert that Colson was now his brother in Christ. When a man or a woman had a religious experience, Hughes declared, “it alters their way of life. Chuck Colson is a new man in Jesus Christ. That’s all there is to it.” [69]. Colson was interviewed by Edward Plowman, the news editor of *Christianity Today*: in the article that resulted, his conversion was taken at face value [71]. In a letter, Plowman told Colson: “Your courage in speaking up will, I’m sure, be a source of inspiration to others.” [72]. Thus it proved. In *Born Again*, Colson describes how news reports of his conversion precipitated a tide of letters into his office, almost all

writing “of prayers that were being offered for me, of the writer’s excitement over one person finding Christ, of Christian love” ([15], p. 186).

## 6. The Conception of *Born Again*

As we have seen, there is an admission in *Born Again* that Colson’s conversion was not quite the accomplished fact that, in December 1973, he and his mentors were asserting it to be. But though the book acknowledges that a conversion unfolds as much as it instantly transfigures, that theme remains implicit. As Charles Griffin points out, the formal narrative structure of *Born Again*, hinging on the “unforgettable night” at Phillips’ home, tends to privilege the distinction between before and after, the old and the new [33].

It was not inevitable that *Born Again* would narrate Colson’s conversion in the way that it did: a meeting with Philips, a surrender to God, and a life decisively redirected onto a new course. Initially, indeed, Colson had no intention of writing a spiritual memoir, even after the news of his conversion attracted widespread interest and comment. What he wanted to write was a book about the Nixon administration—“an honest account”, correcting what he considered the misrepresentations of the press [73,74]. Only in September 1974, during his confinement at Fort Holabird, did Colson begin to give serious thought to authoring a book about his conversion. He had received a number of letters from publishers and writers interested in such a project. However, he wanted first to complete his Nixon volume, a third of which already existed in the form of a rough draft manuscript [75]. At this time, he considered the two books to be distinct and separate ventures. Had they continued to be so, Colson may have ended up in much the same situation as Jeb Magruder. He would have one vividly told, highly marketable, but transparently self-interested account of his participation in an era-defining political scandal; sometime thereafter, this would be trailed by a second book, more introspective in tone and content and also more limited in its popular appeal, telling the tale of his religious redemption [10,76]. With the secular and religious contents of his recent life segregated in this way, how could Colson write in a consistent voice? What was the meaning of his conversion if, in the first of the books, he was to simply describe his experiences in the Nixon White House as if that conversion had not happened? And how, in the second, could he show the transforming grace of God without describing in detail what he had been like before he was born again?

Within a few weeks, Colson had been transferred to Maxwell, where his success in nurturing a small fellowship of Christian inmates, combined with a growing awareness of the failures of the prison system, prompted him to start making notes—in the form of a daily journal—for what he called his “spiritual book” [77]. Upon his return to Holabird in early November, Colson composed a lengthy letter to Roger Elwood, one of the writers who had contacted him, detailing the themes he wanted the work to address [78]. He also arranged for copies of the letter to be sent to at least two other publishers, including Leonard LeSourd of Chosen Books [79,80]. Though small in size, Chosen Books occupied a position at the heart of the emerging evangelical literary establishment. It combined the talents of LeSourd—who had been an executive editor at *Guideposts* magazine—with three accomplished Christian authors: LeSourd’s wife Catherine Marshall, and John and Elizabeth Sherrill. In December, when Colson was in Washington testifying in the trial of Mitchell, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, he met with LeSourd and they agreed to take the book forward together ([6], pp. 286–87).

By this time, Colson was beginning to recognize that he could not tell the story of his conversion without bringing in some of the material from his Nixon manuscript [81]. It was becoming clear, in any case, that a contract for that manuscript would not be readily forthcoming from any of the major mainstream publishers [78,82]. “Colson is such an unattractive figure to the general public”, Peter Schwed of Simon & Schuster told Colson’s literary agent, “that we feel even a lively and honest book from him will have a real barrier to surmount.” [83]. Within a few weeks, almost by default, Colson and LeSourd were working on the assumption that Colson’s spiritual memoir would include at least three substantial chapters on his life and career prior to his encounter with Phillips in August 1973 [84,85]. By the end of January, the overall shape of the book—with that encounter cast as the pivotal “point of change”—had already emerged [86].

## 7. The Gestation of *Born Again*

Colson was an inexperienced writer—he told LeSourd that, during his twenty years in law and politics, he had “dictated everything”—but he was not unskilled [84]. LeSourd informed him that he had “a natural writing talent”—and, just as important when working on a book, an ability to “keep focused on the material for hours at a time” [86]. Still, there were choices about content that LeSourd wanted Colson to make, and narrative techniques that he encouraged him to learn and employ, in order to maximise the interest and appeal of the book. In particular, LeSourd pressed Colson to distil the drama of his conversion and restrain his inclination—which had deepened during his time in prison—to theorize that conversion as mutable and incomplete. Colson proved to be, in LeSourd’s words, “a willing and flexible spirit” [86]. Guided by LeSourd, he came in effect to reconstitute his conversion again—into a narrative that matched the conceptual norms of popular evangelicalism and contributed the force of a recent, conspicuous and apparently secure example of individual spiritual rebirth to the wider evangelical project of religious revival. Students of the autobiographical form have long asked what survives of an account’s authenticity after it has been trussed and tidied in order to enhance its aesthetic status and market appeal ([35], pp. 16–23). The question may have a special salience with respect to the conversion narrative, given the desire of the convert to be artless and true in his or her own relation to God yet also to provide an intelligible and inspiring example to others, and given that many such accounts are written in the crucible of the conversion process while it is still white-hot.

By the time that he left *Guideposts*, a magazine devoted to uplifting autobiographical stories in which religious faith was almost always attained, renewed, or identified as the primary factor in the achievement of happiness and success, LeSourd was probably the most experienced editor of first-person conversion narratives in the United States. Catherine Marshall acknowledged his role in the shaping of her own two works of spiritual memoir, *Something More* (1974) [87] and *Meeting God at Every Turn* (1981) [88]. In both of these books, Marshall described her passage through a succession of personal trials—illness, bereavement, romantic uncertainty—some of which presented a significant challenge to her understanding of the purposes of God. The cumulative lesson she learned from these trials, of course, was not to abandon her faith, but—in accordance with the principle of sanctification—to deepen it: to trust completely in God’s plan for her life. LeSourd encouraged Colson, who was reading *Something More* [84], to structure his book according to a similar pattern, as a progression of scenes, each of which portrayed a conflict between two forces. The resolution of that



conflict would then carry the story forward into the next scene [89]. The book had to have a narrative logic, even if the life it described sometimes did not. This meant leaving out material that Colson had planned to include; and it meant being inventive in other ways too. LeSourd suggested, for example, that Colson open the book with a description of his entrance into prison, swiftly thereafter redirecting the reader to an account of his time in the White House through the device of a flashback while he was lying in his prison bunk at the end of that first day [89]. *Born Again* indeed begins much as LeSourd proposed, with Colson “languishing” at Maxwell, his mind wandering back “to the years when I sat in the Oval Office at the side of the President of the United States” ([15], p. 9). LeSourd was also keen that Colson tell his tale “in the most vivid and interesting manner possible” [89]. “You could stretch your imagination a bit in the writing of scenes”, he observed [85]. He advised Colson not to worry about transcribing conversations accurately, but to focus instead on making the dialogue crisp and clear [89]. Moreover, he should “include some of the other senses: taste, smell, plus colors” [85].

The effects of LeSourd’s persistent advice to Colson to bend his memory to the structural and aesthetic needs of the book are detectable in the account that *Born Again* provides of Colson’s visit with Tom Phillips. LeSourd emphasized the importance of this scene: as it represented “the heart” of Colson’s conversion narrative, it would give him “an opportunity to minister” to his readership. “I really pray for the Holy Spirit to write this chapter through you.” [86]. What LeSourd wanted, and what—with his help—Colson eventually delivered, was an account cleared of any historical details that interfered with the narrative logic of Colson’s conversion or dissipated the dramatic force of his moment of surrender and his decision to accept Christ. In *Born Again*, Colson is persuaded to contact Phillips by a memory of the latter’s serenity when they met at Raytheon’s headquarters earlier in the year. Elsewhere, however, Colson recalled that, during their discussion in Phillips’ office, he had not been impressed: Phillips seemed “very embarrassed and uncomfortable” ([6], p. 193). In the original outline of his “spiritual book”, Colson noted that Phillips had subsequently called him a number of times over the course of the spring and early summer inviting him to visit ([67], p. 7). It was not just Colson’s own curiosity about the change in Phillips’ life, then, that led him to Phillips’ home: he was also being pursued. The original outline, moreover, actually describes two meetings with Phillips in August, either side of Colson’s vacation in Maine—as does a letter that Colson wrote to his probation officer in June 1974, just prior to his sentencing hearing ([67], pp. 8–15; [90]). According to the outline, it was not by the sea that Colson completed his acceptance and first felt the calm assurance of faith. Rather, this had occurred—much like his initial surrender—in his car, after his return visit to Phillips, as the culmination of a quiet evening of conversation, scripture reading and prayer. By leaving this second meeting out of *Born Again*, and relocating the site of commitment to Maine, Colson compressed the timeframe of his spiritual turn and conformed his account of reading Lewis in his coastal cottage to LeSourd’s model of composition. LeSourd had initially feared that this chapter might become “an exercise in intellectualism” [86]. Instead, Colson constructed a scene of conflict between his old lawyerly intellect and the appeal of a simple faith, and then neatly resolved it—in a continuous setting, against the symbolic tumult of the sea—by expediting his commitment to Christ.

In the letter he had written to Roger Elwood as his thoughts on his “spiritual book” first began to form, Colson declared that he was “determined to do more than just tell my story” [78]. In the original outline of the book and early writing drafts, Colson sketched out a series of mini-essays that he wished to insert into the narrative at appropriate points. He proposed, for example, to follow the account of his

tearful first prayer in the car after leaving Phillips' home with some reflections "about how misunderstood the term 'conversion' is". Colson did not want this scene "to be a climatic point in Book [sic.]. It was a climax in my life at the time but now I see it only as the beginning, not an end in itself". He would explain to his readers that many conversions were not accomplished in a blinding flash, but instead necessarily involved "hard struggles". His own decision to surrender had been the start "of a difficult personal battle, an awakening, a new birth with a lot of painful growing pains to come". It may have been "a conversion as most people understand that term but I now realize that I really had a long way to go (and maybe still do)" [91]. Indeed, lacking as he did a clear sense of resolution in his religious journey, Colson's initial thought was to end the book with "kind of an understated view of what conversion is, what it means to life, what it isn't, *etc.*" [81]. By means of such commentaries, Colson hoped to challenge the spiritual complacency that he had identified in many evangelicals. As he told Elwood, "I don't want my story simply to allow them to enjoy another testimony and relax in the false security of what they believe to be their own commitment. I want to prick their consciences." Colson continued: "In some respects the carnal Christian needs help more than the unsaved for the unsaved is, at least, honest with himself; the carnal Christian thinks he has found a new life when, in fact, he hasn't. That false assumption leads to pride, intolerance, arrogance and hypocrisy, the complete components of the anti-God state of mind." [78].

During the editorial process, these didactic interjections almost entirely disappeared from the text. Perhaps they were sacrificed because the inclusion of material from Colson's time in the White House created pressures of space. But they also conflicted, in style and content, with Leonard LeSourd's ambitions for Colson's book. *Born Again* would not have appealed to evangelicals as much as it did—nor encouraged other readers to review their own relations with God—had it sermonized explicitly that a conversion was not authentic unless it was painful and indefinite. LeSourd believed that, as far as possible, Colson should seek to convey his ideas in a narrative form. As he explained later, when working on *Life Sentence*: "Like Christ's parables, a memorable story does the teaching in a complete way" [92]. That was the point, however: in the view of LeSourd, a story could not contain and hold a moral unless it was complete. Whatever uncertainties Colson had experienced in the wake of his spiritual rebirth would need to be resolved by the end of his memoir; whatever resistances he had maintained would need to be broken down in an experience of sanctification. And so the book did not close with a gentle meditation on the open-endedness of conversion, but—in the wake of Al Quie's offer to take his place in prison—with the "mountaintop experience" of Colson's "total surrender, completing what had begun in Tom Phillips' driveway eighteen long months before" ([15], p. 370).

## 8. The Delivery of *Born Again*

Colson and LeSourd found it difficult to decide upon a title for the book, probably because they had first to decide whether the title should stress the change accomplished in the author or the challenges that he had confronted in his journey of faith. One handwritten list of candidates included both the categorical—"Rebirth!", "Penetration By Light"—and the conditional: "My Toughest Walk", "My Hardest Role". There is a tick against "Beyond Pride" [93]. With the printer's deadline fast approaching, Colson settled on "A Mountain Yet to Climb". Then he changed his mind once more. During a church service, his wife pointed to the title of a hymn, "Born Again". "That's you. That's your book", she told

him. Colson does not explain why he liked his wife's idea, except to suggest that it came to her from God ([2], pp. 92–93; [6], p. 289).

The phrase “born again”—drawn from the biblical account of Christ's dialogue with Nicodemus [94]—may have lacked broad cultural currency prior to the publication of Colson's memoir, but, as this story indicates, it had hardly been an unknown article in contemporary Christian speech. In the course of 1976, the phrase was able to travel out into wider public discourse because it evoked a universal and elemental circumstance of human existence—a circumstance, moreover, that was usually understood as a definite event in time. If it was the moment of birth that ultimately confirmed the viability of a human life, so—under the terms of the analogy—a new life in Christ was proclaimed by an occasion of “rebirth”. It was within this frame of reference that, upon its publication, *Born Again* was received. Only occasionally did reviewers identify—as Alan Steuber had—that the conversion experience described in the book extended well beyond Colson's meeting with Tom Phillips and his weekend in Maine [95]. For most, the central question was whether the author was sincere in his conversion, not whether that conversion was complete. A number of reviewers judged that Colson might have been more candid and specific about his own moral lapses when serving as a Nixon aide, but almost all were convinced that his character was now transformed [96–99]. “This reviewer”, declared Edmund Fuller in the *Wall St. Journal*, “must say forthrightly, even though he is not at home in the evangelical style, that he believes Mr. Colson's conversion, that he does not find ‘rebirth’ an exaggerated term, and hopes that Mr. Colson never experiences in that metaphor a ‘redeath.’” [100]. By the time that *Born Again* was published, assessments of the sincerity of Colson's change of heart were able to draw upon the evidence of works in addition to the book: most of the reviews noted that Colson had recently begun a prison ministry. However, the essential task of persuasion was performed by *Born Again*. Eighteen months previously, Mary McGrory, a long-time liberal critic of the Nixon administration, had written skeptically of Colson's conversion [101]. Now she observed: “Not even Chuck Colson, who faked so much for Richard Nixon, could have faked the passages that relate to his shattering discovery, in the midst of Watergate dolors, that Christ is God and God is love.” [102]. Edmund Fuller agreed: “Anyone who knows anything of the workings of such phenomena will recognize the experiences; they ring true from Saul of Tarsus to today, in the great or the obscure.” [100].

## 9. Conclusions

That the popular success of *Born Again* depended in large measure upon the priority it gave to Colson's encounter with Tom Phillips, and upon the skill with which that encounter was narrated, was confirmed in 1978 when the book was adapted into a truly mediocre film [103]. Colson initially had high hopes for the production. A portion of whatever profits it made would be donated to his prison ministry. If the nation's millions of evangelicals came to view the film, the resulting revenues would be substantial: “it could raise up to half a million dollars for us this year”, he noted in February [104,105]. His ministry developed a massive publicity operation to support the film's release, organizing 30 regional premieres across the United States and Canada [106]. These made some money, but general box office takings were disappointingly low [107]. There was no market penetration to compare with that achieved by the book. Even evangelical critics found it hard to wholeheartedly endorse the film. In

particular, they found fault with the performance of Dean Jones in the lead role. “I did care about Colson when I read the book”, wrote John Lawing in *Christianity Today*, “yet I was unable to identify with the Jones portrayal of him.” [108]. Jones gave no definition to the changes wrought in Colson as a result of his conversion. He was unconvincing as a political hard man in the first part of the film; later, as Colson the convert, he was passive and under-powered—a “milquetoast”, one reviewer commented [109]. It was difficult to credit this Colson with wrestling meaningfully with the challenge of surrendering his will to God. Jones, to be fair, was not helped by the screenplay, which lacked the careful attention to scene construction and narrative logic evident in Colson’s book. Unfathomably, the key encounter between Colson and Phillips was set outside in a sunlit garden, retaining none of the close, interrogative intensity that, in the written account, had made dramatic sense of Colson’s admission of sin. Then, between Phillips’ prayer and Colson’s departure, the screenplay inserted a pleasant dinner with Phillips and his wife. It resorted to the device of a voiceover—Phillips’ words in the garden haunting his thoughts—to explain why Colson, after entering his car, abruptly collapsed in tears and entreated God to “Take me”.

By this time, however, Colson’s career in evangelicalism was sufficiently well-established to survive the embarrassment of a lousy film. One evangelical editor noted how much he had changed in the years since 1975, when—recently released from prison and at work on *Born Again*—he had made his first hesitant entry onto the evangelical circuit. Colson was now “alert, secure, open, friendly and determined. He did not seem to be searching for acceptance—he assumed it” [110]. *Born Again* had not just confirmed that Colson had a home amongst evangelicals; it had endowed him with authority too. The man who had written the most celebrated conversion narrative of the evangelical revival found audiences now interested in his ideas as well as his testimony. There was an irony in this: by tempering his inclination to be didactic in his memoir, and by offering his readers instead an account of an apparently completed spiritual transformation, Colson had earned the right to question the measures of sanctification attained across the evangelical revival. Two years after his memoir was published, Colson was speaking forthrightly on the themes of the contingency of faith, the persistence of sin, and—with an emphasis at variance to traditional evangelical doctrines of justification—the emptiness of spiritual rebirth if it was not matched by a dedication to Christian works. “The church must be on the front lines, solving problems, meeting needs”, he declared. “We will discover new power and the revitalizations of our churches when we do.” [66]. Once more, a provisional title was significant. *Life Sentence*, Colson’s second book, which described the crisis of purpose that delayed and shadowed his early ventures in prison ministry as well as the many hard trials through which that ministry had passed, initially was to be called “The Cost of Being Born Again” [64].

Nevertheless, although he had, in *Born Again*, materially abbreviated the course of his own conversion and also, for its conclusion, fashioned an experience of “total surrender” that he later acknowledged to have been premature, Colson came to promote the model of religious rebirth offered in his book as foundational to the enterprise of evangelicalism in the modern world. Certainly, in affirmation of their obedience to Christ and to arm themselves against the seductions of cheap grace, evangelicals would need to make a commitment to works. Furthermore, Colson believed, the challenge presented to the influence of Christian values by secularization, science and multiculturalism required evangelicals to join with other Christian traditions, most notably Roman Catholics, in a common missionary endeavor, accepting the freedom of these traditions to sanction routes to salvation other

than through the adventure of being “born again” [111]. But evangelicals, he noted, would remain distinct in their insistence that baptismal initiation into church membership was dependent upon the prior experience of new birth. Moreover, if their work in the world was to achieve success, it had to stand on the ground of sanctification: on the turning away from sin, on the dedication of each evangelical life to the service of God’s will [112].

Colson made the message central to his own ministry in America’s prisons. His organization, Prison Fellowship, aimed to do more than simply stimulate a seeking impulse amongst prison inmates; it was not satisfied with supporting the kind of “understated”, open-ended conversion that Colson and LeSourd had overwritten with a tale of sanctification at the close of *Born Again*. Prison Fellowship, as Tanya Erzen has observed, operated as a laboratory for neo-liberal alternatives to secular, state-directed social provision: it was therefore keen to demonstrate, often invoking the testimony of converted prisoners, that it had effected wholesale transformations in the lives and values of those who had participated in its programs and that it had done so with measurably greater success than conventional non-religious rehabilitative techniques [113]. These claims only made sense in the context of a concept of conversion that encompassed both a radical about-turn and a definable point of graduation. To magnetize the interest of policy-makers, Prison Fellowship declared that, in the right conditions, it could institute programs that would produce such conversions almost as a matter of course. Afforded the opportunity to administer its own prison units in the states of Texas, Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota, Prison Fellowship directed selected prisoners through an intensive eighteen-month treatment program—titled the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI)—intended to instill a conviction of their personal sinfulness, an awareness of their need to change and a commitment henceforth to be utterly obedient to God. Only an ear attuned to constitutional niceties distinguished Prison Fellowship’s account of its objectives for inmates in its IFI units from traditional evangelical models of the conversion process—but it was not enough to keep the program out of trouble in the courts [114]. When a successful lawsuit was filed against the IFI program in Iowa as a violation of the separation of church and state, Colson’s recent literary works were cited prominently in the trial judgment and his understanding of conversion was ascribed all the qualities of assertiveness and self-assurance that it had acquired in the three decades since his spiritual autobiography had helped to augur in the year of the evangelical. “A key concept in Chuck Colson’s writings”, observed Judge Robert W. Pratt, “is that you must be born again” [115].

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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