"That Was the Time I Got Converted": Born-Again Tales from the BGC Archives

[Talk given by Bob Shuster to Wheaton College alumni as part of the annual Treasures of Wheaton program. May 6, 2006.]

Links to audio files of the interview excerpts are available through the headphone icon.

Good morning. The theme for Alumni Weekend this year is "Be Made New." This morning we are going to draw on the resources of the archives on campus to talk about change, rebirth, transformation in the Christian life. I am going to take a few items from the Billy Graham Center Archives to tell some stories about that we call being born again, the beginning of a Christian life. Then Dr. Jerry Root will talk about C. S. Lewis' on the transformation that is continually going on within that life.

Let me start with three quotes from the founder of our feast here at the BGC, Rev. Billy Graham. The first talks about Christian rebirth as the process by which God is the actor, bringing man to salvation:

The task of the evangelist is to plant the seed as a farmer would plant seed in the springtime. The farmer cannot make the seed grow; he cannot generate life – this can only be done by God. So, when the seed is planted in the human heart, if other conditions are right, God will make the seed grow, causing that person to mature spiritually.

From "Spiritual Maturity" Hour of Decision radio program, April 5, 1959

The next talks about conversion as a human drama, involving human choice:

There are three little men that live inside of every one of us. One is intellect, another is emotion, and the third is will. Intellectually, you may accept Christ. Emotionally, you may feel that you can love Him. However, until you have surrendered to Christ by a definite act of your will, you are not a Christian.

From "The Assurance of Salvation" Hour of Decision radio program, September 14, 1958

Finally, he describes being born again as a sudden change that takes a lifetime to unfold:

Being a Christian is more than just an instantaneous conversion. It is likely a daily process whereby you grow to be more and more like Christ.

[Note: The above *Hour of Decision* materials are no longer available at the archives. They were relocated in 2019 by the Billy Graham Evangelist Association to the new Billy Graham Archive & Research Center in Charlotte, NC.]



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So, rebirth comes from God's action, human action, is instant and is continuing. Above all, it is mysterious.

When Jesus said to Nicodemus in the third chapter of John that unless a person is born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus is understandably shocked. This is an incredible idea, to be born again, to start life anew. And a couple of millenniums of theological discussion has not made it one whit less so. A new birth, the redemption of one's life, a passage from life to death, a surrender to the Creator of creation, the start of a friendship with the savior of the human race - this whether gradual or sudden is a central event in the lives of those who experience it. And this personal earthquake certainly should leave evidences of its occurrence in the a changed life. Yet what kind of evidence would there be? Specifically, what kind of physical souvenirs, the type you would find in an archives, are likely to be left behind?

At the BGC Archives, we collect material about Christian witness, the proclamation of the Gospel. And of course, conversion is an intended result of that proclamation and so part of the story we are trying to document. And yet it is not easy to document a mystery.

We don't preserve past in the Billy Graham Center Archives because the past is by definition gone. Nor do we preserve history, although we help to make some of the writing of it possible, since history is the remembered past or the studied past or the interpreted past. What we do is to preserve a hundred different types of physical souvenirs which contain some kind of information about past events. So, we have letters and diaries and scrapbooks and minutes of meetings and wire recordings and compact disks and phonographs and magic lantern slides and maps and posters and 8mm films and reels of 2" video and transcripts of oral history interviews

In part we have them because they are physical bridge to the past, survivors from a previous time, like Ben Franklin's bifocals.

In part we have them because they give us some insight into the minds of other people who have lived before us, like <u>Jim Elliot's journals</u>.

But at best, all the hundreds of thousands of documents we have gathered are only a few physical fragments that symbolize a much great reality that we cannot wholly recreate. Torrey Johnson, Jr for example, class of '30, left behind him tens of thousands of paper documents at his death, not to mention films, audio recordings, and photographs. Since his family generously donated these materials to the Archives, we have spent about eighteen months arranging, describing, and microfilming his files of correspondence, sermon notes, church records, evangelistic campaign materials. And yet these hardly tell the story of his whole life are even of all the important events in it. Each of us can think of the disparity between the story of our own lives on one hand and on the other, our own collection of papers. You probably have some collection of papers, even if you are not a compulsive saver.



The collection is made up of those various items we have in the attics or the garage that we kept for future reference or because they were important to us or because we forgot about them and never got around to throwing them out. If we do ever get around to looking through our personal collection, we will find that some or many of the events and experiences that were most important to us or which we think shaped us most left little or no impression in our papers, only in our minds and hearts.

We actually have in the Archives no documents from the moment or from very close to the moment of conversion, as experienced from the inside, as experienced by the convert. In theory, you can imagine someone writing in her diary, "I gave my life to Christ today," or someone writing in a letter to a friend, "Last Tuesday, I became a Christian." But we do not have any such documents in the Archives that I know of. The closest thing to it are these cards filled out by counselors of new converts from the 1959 Billy Graham crusade in Wheaton. And these, of course are second hand. They were filled out not by the converts but by the ministers of the churches who had been asked to follow up on people who came forward at the crusade. And even second hand these cards do not contain information on what was going on inside the converts, only a few basic statistics.

In fact, all of the documents in the Archives in which Christians describe their born-again experiences were created not on the initiative of the convert but by outsiders. Mostly what we have here are two different types of documents: oral history interviews and questionnaires.

The <u>oral histories</u> are created on the initiative of the Archives staff. About two hundred and fifty people have been interviewed so far, many of them Wheaton alumnae. We contact someone - a pastor, an evangelist, a youth worker, a chaplain - someone involved in Christian work and arrange to tape several interviews with them about their life and faith. Naturally, these interviews usually contain a section about how the interviewee, the narrator, became a Christian. These interviews of course are shaped by the questions and interaction between the interviewer and the narrator. Even more important, from the point of view of interpreting the interview, is the fact that oral history is not the event itself but the interviewee's interpretation of the event. Inevitably, all a person's experiences since the event described, affect his description of that event. A bridegroom and bride might describe their wedding one way the day after and another fifty years after.

The other types of records we have are questionnaires. People might be applying for positions as stewards at a Christian conference and part of their job application is a question about how they came to know Christ and their experience as a Christian. People filling out steward or missionary questionnaires, of course, want to be selected by the selection committee, and that perhaps shapes their answers to some extent, even if unconsciously.

By their very nature, the narratives on the oral history interviews and the questionnaires are humanistic. That is, they are told from a human, not a divine, viewpoint. Christians have a



wide variety of explanations of just how Jesus saves, of how his death and resurrection atone. But the nature of these narratives inevitably makes the individual a significant actor, even as he or she receives irresistible grace. This is how the individual experienced his or her new birth and the emphasis is on the steps he took, even if from a broader perspective he is indeed walking on a conveyor belt to God. American Evangelicalism has been criticized for its emphasis on the individual as opposed to the household of faith, the community of believers. This is doubtless fair, yet it is also true that embodied in the very metaphors of new birth and life after death is the idea of experiences we all experience alone even when we do them in a crowd or in a community. So remember, there is a divine side to every story that you are about to hear and each individual is part of the body of Christ.

<u>Rev. Consuella York</u> – pastor, evangelist, social worker, and prison chaplain - reminds us of that as she tells her story, describing her conversion at the age of twelve at the First Corinthian Church in Nashville, Tennessee:



Now I attended Sunday school there, and it was there that I accepted Christ my personal Savior. I was twelve years of age. And I was baptized. The pastor's name was Reverend H. G. Hockett [?], I mean, and I accepted Christ as my Savior then. And it made a difference and it's b...was a lasting thing. And as I look back over it now, I see the Lord had this thing all arranged in all the things I've gone through, it was for my betterment, 'cause I...I loved the Lord, And [pauses] when I was younger, I...I used to think that I was just being good because I was being good; I didn't want to do wrong.

But I realize now that it was only through Christ that motivated, because when he's the Lord of your life, he makes the decisions. You think you're making the decisions; you want to give yourself credit for it. I realize now it was him, all the time.

[From Collection 397, Tape T2]

For the next few minutes, I just want to share a few samples from the rich treasury of conversion stories we have in the Archives:

Why do people turn to Christ? For reasons many and various and mysterious.

Belief - personal, meaningful belief - can be hard for some who grow up in Christian homes. To what degree is their faith real, how much is it just the tradition they grew up in? <u>Archer Torrey</u>, for example, was the son of missionaries and the grandson of evangelist Reuben Archer Torrey Sr, who was also the first president of Moody Bible Institute. It was also just assumed that he would be a minister or missionary:





But then when I got to college, it occurred to me that if I didn't know for sure whether there was a God or not, it would be dishonest to get up and preach that there was one. So, I better settle that question for sure. And while I kind of assumed there was a God, had assumed it all this time, and premised my life and behavior on that assumption, it was nothing but an assumption. It wasn't a fact of experience.... I assumed that God was there, I took it for granted, I prayed to Him, and I made an act of total surrender and I accepted Christ as my Savior. I did all those things and yet when I arrived in

college, looking back on it, I had done it because I assumed He was there. And from time to time, I seemed to have received His guidance and yet I did not have in my heart an absolute certainty that God existed. It could be just a lot of theory. It could be just something I'd inherited from my parents. And it occurred to me that if I didn't know for sure, if I didn't have any certainty that God existed, I couldn't be a preacher, I'd had no business being a preacher, and goody-goody, I could go into physics, which is what I really wanted to do.... But I figured, if there is a God, and I'm not right with Him, I'm going to be in real trouble, and I better settle this, so I asked God to make Himself real to me if He's there. And He did, but it took Him about two and a half years. But I promised I would read my Bible every day and I would pray simply and honestly, without any pretense, and see what would happen.... And when I read something in the Scripture that seemed to me probable that God was speaking to me through this Scripture, I would obey it. That was the test. If nothing happened, then okay, there's no God. If something happened, then probably there is. And it was on this basis that evidence began to accumulate. It began to look like there really was a God. But I didn't have any inner certainty at the end of the first year, so I decided to run the experiment a second year, and then at the end of the second year the cumulative force of evidence seemed to be that there probably was a God, and He probably was the God of the Bible, but I still didn't feel I had a certainty, so I decided to run the experiment one more year and somewhere through in the middle of that third year it suddenly hit me. There was no longer a shred of question in my mind. He was for real, and He was the God of the Bible. And absolutely no question, He existed. And from then on, there was no question of doing anything but what He wanted me to do. And I set aside my ideas of going into physics or any other career, and went ahead for the ministry, much as I disliked the idea. I had to obey. Now, I didn't learn to love God until quite a bit later. I learned to know that He existed and that He had to be obeyed, I was a good Jonah. [Laughs] So I understand the Jonah mentality completely, but in time He also taught me to love Him.

[From Collection 331, Tape T1]

Often a person traced the moment of their conversion to a particular phrase or a single word that stuck in their mind for some reason. Here is an excerpt from an interview with <u>Bill</u> <u>Drury</u>, who was born in a Coldwater flat in New York City, served as an infantryman during the Battle of the Bulge and had settled into a business career back in New York when he experienced his new birth. He was attending the church of his new-in-laws.:





And I sat halfway back.... But I could take you to that church and point out whereabouts I...I sat. And I heard him talk about this Saul of Tarsus, this murderer, this religious zealot, and how he meets Jesus Christ on the Damascus Turnpike, and the whole scene, the whole scenario, how he came to know Christ and how he said, "Lord, what...what will you have me to do?" And those words a few hours later meant something to me. And he also said that he [Saul] was the chief of sinners and that really rang a bell. And I thought, "No way, Jóse! I'm the chief of sinners, I'm the guy who...." The

whole nine vards. I don't know whether I shared last time how I hit skid row in New Orleans. but I had done it all. I had done it all. "Fellow, I don't know what you're talking about but I'm the chief of sinners." No invitation was given. We talk much about the work of the Holy Spirit. As I look back, I didn't know any of the semantics, the phraseology, the cliches. And I realize that it was the Holy Spirit of God dealing with Bill Drury, convicting, and chastising, reproving, rebuking.... I could walk from the church to my home a few blocks away. And for the first time in my life - a very proud, vulgar G.I. home from the wars, now a civilian with a chip on my shoulder - I walked through the streets of Elmont, Long Island, and I felt unclean, unclean.... I mean I just felt like I had lived in a cesspool for twenty-three-and-a-half years. And I cleaned cesspools on...on Long Island so I know something about that. And I went home.... My wife said to me, "Dear, would you like to have some coffee, tea?" I said, "I don't want anything." I said, "Leave me alone. Get off my case and go to bed!" I was sick, Bob. I was spiritually sick.... And I went out in this little enclosed porch. And we had a couch on it, and I fell on my knees.... And I simply said to God, "I...I. I don't know how to talk to you. I don't know how anybody can talk to somebody like...." [laughs] And I muttered for seven hours, from eleven o'clock at night till six o'clock in the morning.... And I went around and round and I said, "Whatever you did for that guy in the book, the Bible, whatever you did for him, I want you to do for me, okay? I don't have any of the smarts that he had, but I want you to...I want to know personally that you are my God and that you can come into my life." I didn't know how to talk.... How does somebody who had never talked to God one-on-one talk to God? And I said, "Listen, as you know, and I probably don't have to tell you, that I stutter real badly. And I don't think you can do it because Dale Carnegie couldn't do it, the speech therapists, speech tutors in school...." I said, "But if you free this tongue, if you free this tongue, I'll use it for your honor and your glory," I said, "the rest of my life." And He did exactly that. He freed the tongue...And I don't claim to be a mystic or anything like that, but when I got off my knees, I knew that I had met God. I...I...I knew that...you know, for fear of sounding charismatic, you know [chuckles]...I just knew that I was cleansed, I was forgiven, that somehow, some way (I was a high school dropout, as I shared I believe, I didn't go to high school)...that somehow, someway, if it was cleaning out, you know, cesspools with my bare hands, I was going to serve God. Whatever I was going to do, I was going to serve God.

[Collection 492, Tape T3]

Of course, we have many tales from people who experienced conversion at mass meetings. Here is a document by <u>Laura Barr</u>, written in her 79th year, after decades of service as a missionary in the Congo and Uganda as a Bible translator and teacher. It is called "Outline of



my life, thus far!" Here is her straightforward description of her own conversion which occurred at meetings held by evangelist Rodney "Gypsy" Smith:

I joined the Presbyterian Church at the age of 11 or 12 and took communion for the first time. We children had gone to church and Sunday school from our earliest days, also we had memorized lots of Scripture through the years, had mission and Bible stories read to us, sung childish hymns and Bible stories with mother, etc. But I did not know, even after joining the church, whether or not I was really a Christian, and whether I'd go to heaven when I died. I don't think I spoke to anyone about my doubts. During those early teen years, neither Lila or I wanted to be 'religious', nor did we want to be missionaries. We felt there were enough missionaries in our family! In September 1930 Gypsy Smith came to town and had an evangelistic campaign in the Methodist Church across from the high-school. I was at the time in the middle of my junior year, 16 years old. I went, and went again, and the third night I raised my hand, went forward and into the inquiry room and sincerely prayed the prayer he said to pray: "Lord Jesus, make my heart Thy home." All my doubt was removed, I knew I was saved, and I had a completely new attitude toward the Bible. This decision changed the whole course of my life other than going to Art school, as I had planned.

[Collection 481, Box 2, Folder 2]

Here is the story of the evangelistic campaign of W. H. Farrington in Barbados at which <u>T.</u> Michael Flowers came to the Lord. He later became an evangelist himself.



And one night I was standing on the corner and in the distance I heard singing. And they would march. They were marching, and when they come into a stop, to a light in the street they would circle around him, gather around him and they would sing a song, finish the song, he would give a brief word and an invitation that went something like this, "We're having a series of meetings." And he'd give the name of the place. "You're welcome, the seats are free and there is absolutely no collection." [slaps hands together] And then we'd march toward the hall. And I was on the corner, so I

followed them to the place and I listened with rapt attention.... But I went there, and I heard again the proclamation of the Gospel and that night I could have received the Lord Jesus but for some reason I didn't. I waited until the very last night. And I didn't intend to do it although I wanted to do I didn't. I grabbed my hat and I made for the door. And at the door was an elder by the name of George Minus [sp.?]. I didn't know his name then. Afterwards I to know his name was George Minus, because he was a plumber and I worked as a carpenter, and later on we worked for the same contractor. So, he said to me, "Young man, when are you going to decide?" And I kind of mumbled something, and he said, "Why not do it tonight?" [thumbs the desk or floor] I did. I turned around and I went back, fifty-three years ago. Thank God for that man who stood there and just said, "Why don't you do it tonight?" The greatest blessing that has ever come to me.

[From Collection 431, Tape T1]



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All the tales we have heard so far have been told from the inside. Here is a tale from the outside. Marguerite Owen was a missionary with China Inland Mission in the little town Taiho in Honan province. Here she led Bible studies and evangelistic meetings for women. And the person she least expected was the one on whom she had an impact. Here is her first impression of that girl:



OWEN: She...you almost have to see her to...she thought she was very stylish. She had very bright blue trousers and a purple jacket, a purple top.... Her hair was tied back with shocking pink ribbons and bows on each side there. And I...I thought she was just a giddy girl. I knew she was...one thing, I knew she was very spoiled.... Most other girls her age were already either married or else they were going to be married and they couldn't come out or something.

INTERVIEWER: How old was she?

OWEN: About seventeen or eighteen. And she was still single and she was still free. And she had this long, long braid down her back with red...red cords written [sic] into it. And she came at Christmas and...she came and she said, "I want to buy a Bible...." And I said, "But that cost a dollar." And she said, "I know." And I said, "Where'd you get a dollar?" Now you know that sounds very rude, but in China to have a whole dollar.... She said, "My uncle gave it to me because I made him two pairs of shoes. He gave it to me to buy a new [Chinese word]" But she said, "I'd rather have a Bible...." And I thought, "Here's this girl who's so stylish and yet she'd rather have a Bible." And she couldn't read it. She couldn't read it. I said, "Why do you want the Bible?" "I want to learn more about my Lord." I said, "Your Lord? When did you ask the Savior to be your Lord?" "At the meeting, don't you remember?" I said.... You ask everybody who wanted to have Jesus come into their heart to ask them. And I said, "I didn't know," She said, "Did I have to tell you?" [Shuster laughs] I said, "No, you didn't have to tell us." But we...we had given an invitation, but, you know, she hadn't made any response."

The girl learned to read, mostly self-taught, in order to study the Bible. After she was thrown out of her home by her uncles because of her new faith, she went to Bible school and became a teacher. She began an outreach program among women in which she was joined by another Bible teacher. They continued their ministry under the Communist regime. Mrs. Owen remembered a later visit, the last time she saw her:





I never saw such a positive example of, "If a man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away, all things are become new." [2 Corinthians 5:17] And when I saw I remembered the first time I'd seen her and I could not believe it was the same person. She was dressed as a teacher in a long blue gown and her long hair was done in a beautiful knot in the back. And her face was radiant and all of the gaudy things she'd had on before, none of them were around. She didn't even want them or care for them. And she...that's how I knew so much of this story, 'cause she told...we

went over all things that she had done.... So those two women, both of whom I knew intimately...the last I heard of them they were in this big church in...well, the church was no longer big...but I mean, they were in this big city, Wuhu, still witnessing and still praising. And still working and supporting themselves. As well...those two of things that I just praise the Lord for most.

[Collection 534, Tape T3]

As this small selection from the tiny sample of conversion tales from the Archives suggests, there are as many ways of being born again as there are people, and each path has its unexpected turnings. A case in point is our last conversion tale:

Andrew Wyzenbeek. Mr Wyzenbeek was the first person interviewed for the Archives, back in 1978. He was a Dutch immigrant who came to the United States in 1907 and was working as a mechanical engineer and supervisor in Iowa that year. (Many years later, Wyzenbeek's friend, V. Raymond Edman, wrote up the story of his conversion in a tract entitled, "Six Dirty Swedes.")



There were some men under me that were known as the six dirty Swedes....
They worked in a little department where they made a mining lamp.... And they smelled bad. I kept away from them. But one Monday when I came to work, two of those fellows looked entirely different. They came well dressed. White shirt. They hung up their shirt. They took all their clothes off and put on overalls..., And I said to a friend of mine, "What happened to those Swedes of mine?" I thought they were going to ask me for the day off to go to a funeral. [Laughs]. "No," he said, "haven't you heard? They walked the

sawdust trail at a <u>Billy Sunday</u> meeting." Well...that didn't mean anything to me.... But to make a long story short in about a week (or less than two weeks) all six of them got the same thing. And I couldn't imagine what had caused that change. So, I talked to one of the Swedes. And I said, "Ollie, what happened to you fellows? You're different." He says, "Yeah, Mr. Wyzenbeek. We ...we are different. We are new men. We are born again." I said, "Born again?" "Yes," he said, "we have come to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior. And He put a new spirit and a new heart in us. All six of us. "Man," I said to myself, "how fanatical can you be?"



But hearing the Swedes' story did not convert him. It did make him curious, so he went to the Sunday meeting.



So I went in. Sat about halfway on the outside of the seat, so I could get out when I wanted to. And Billy Sunday preached. And I couldn't understand him at all. He spoke rapidly. He used big words.... So, I was very much puzzled at the end of the service. But Billy was closing the meeting and he said, "Now before you go...before we leave let's turn around and shake hands with our neighbors and tell them God bless you." Well...so I turned around, and there was an old lady, and I shook hands with her. And she said, "Young man, are you a Christian?" I said, "No, ma'am." She said, "Wouldn't you like to be?" I

said, "I should say not...."And so I turned around and stared at the ground you know, and I said to myself, "I treated the old lady bad. I shouldn't have done that." (She was probably forty. I was twenty you know. Twenty-one.) And so, I turned around again and I said, "I beg your pardon, lady. But I didn't mean what I said. I wish I was a Christian." She said, "You do!" And she grabbed me by the arm and yanked me off the seat because I was on the outside and shoved. She shoved me all the way forward [laughs]. And somebody grabbed my arm and shoved it up. I shook hands with Billy Sunday, who was still standing on the platform. Somebody else took me and led me to a seat, a front seat. And I sat down. Well, that's all there was to it. And I looked myself over and I said, "Is this what they do here? Doesn't mean a thing."

And then a counselor came and talked to him. And that did not convert him either. Neither one understood what the other was talking about. But the counselor filled out a card and the card was sent to a church and the church invited him to a meeting that made him go out and out of curiosity buy a Bible. And he sat down to read it. And that did not convert him either. So, he took the Bible back to the store where he bought it.



And I took it back to him a couple of hours later. And I said, "Look. This isn't regular English. I can read a newspaper by this time, but I can't read this." "Oh," he said, "That is sixteenth century diction. And that's a King James version." "Well," I said, "it doesn't mean anything to me." And then he turned around and picked up another smaller book. And he said, "Here is a New Testament." Now, believe or not, I didn't know there was an Old or a New Testament because I had never seen a Bible [pauses] in Dutch. And he said, "This is in modern English." And I said, "How much?" He said, "A

dollar." So, for a dollar, I got a book that I could read, and I found it fascinating. And I read the rest of the day. That night I got on my knees at my bedside. I found out that I was a sinner. And I...for the first time in my life I addressed God. And I said, "Father God." Who taught me to say "God Father"...to call God "Father?" And I asked for forgiveness. And peace came in my heart. It overwhelmed me. That was the time I got converted and I found the Lord Jesus Christ my savior. And I've trusted Him ever since.

[Collection 40, Tape T1]



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In telling these conversion tales, perhaps it seems I am presenting too pretty a picture. How new really are these born-again Christians? What of their failures and backslidings? Of the Gethsemanes and crucifixions that are also part of the life of any Christian who truly takes up his cross to follow Christ. But it would be untrue to tell the stories of conversion without the emphasis on joy. As it says in the Psalms,

"Surely You have granted him eternal blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence." [Psalms 21:6]

I'll let an evangelist have the last word, to express what is at stake in born again tales. <u>Oswald Smith</u> was saved at the age of sixteen, one hundred years ago this year [2006], at meetings Archer Torrey's grandfather, <u>R. A. Torrey Sr</u>, held in Toronto, Ontario. In his seventies, Smith reflected on the experience in a sermon called, "What does it mean to believe?"



There is no life like it. I wouldn't exchange it for all the money of the world. I've been a Christian now for sixty-four years. I praise God for the decision I made sixty-four years ago. I'm so glad I acted. I ask you today, have you acted? You believe, every one of you. But have you acted? Have you trusted? Have you floated? Have you put your trust in the Lord Jesus? If you will, the moment you do, you will pass out of death and in life and this Founder's Week conference will be crowned by the salvation of immortal souls.

[Collection 322, Tape T22, click here to hear the entire sermon (30 minutes)]

