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Conversion in the Bible*

Dr France, Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, prepared this paper for a 'Consultation on Conversion' held in Hong Kong in January, 1988. Although a report of the paper has appeared elsewhere, we are glad to publish it here in full as a comprehensive survey of a crucial biblical doctrine.

In modern English usage *conversion* (in its religious sense) is typically defined as 'A change to another attitude or belief, as in a change of religion' (Collins English Dictionary). Thus one might speak of the conversion of a Muslim to be a Christian, or of a Protestant to be a Catholic, where what is involved is membership of a new, and often opposed, religious community. Within evangelical Christian circles, however, *conversion* is used also for the situation of adherents of a religious group (normally 'nominal Christians') whose experience of the personal dimension of their religious

* This paper was first given at a Consultation co-sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. Rather than publish the papers of the conference, the organisers commissioned Dr David Wells to write a book incorporating some of their substance, and this was published by Baker and Paternoster in 1989 under the title *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World*. I am now publishing this paper separately in the hope that it will form a useful overview of its limited area in a way which cannot be achieved by the extracts incorporated into Dr Wells' more wide-ranging book. It may perhaps also help to commend that book to those who do not yet know it.

One obvious omission from this paper is a specific consideration of the conversion of Paul. This results from the fact that there was a separate paper on that subject at the consultation. I wondered whether in publishing this paper separately I should aim to fill that gap, but concluded not only that this would make the paper too long, but also that it might be no bad thing to avoid focusing the subject too closely on the specific case of Paul, which is so often treated as the 'paradigm conversion account', and yet which is in a number of ways not necessarily typical of Christian conversion in general. Indeed some have questioned whether 'conversion' is the right term to use for Paul's Damascus Road experience, and whether it was not more of a 'missionary call'. B. R. Gaventa offers a full critical study of the issue, in particular drawing a sharp distinction between what Paul has to say in his letters about his own 'transformation' and the three Lucan accounts of his conversion.

affiliation undergoes a radical transformation, so that, while there has been no 'change of religion' in the sense of the repudiation of a previous affiliation and the entry to a new religious community, they now regard themselves as 'true Christians' in a way that they previously were not.

While each of these senses of the word focuses on the entry into a true experience of God in Christ, they are significantly different with regard to the background and the process involved. In what follows I shall distinguish these two uses of the word as '*outsider conversion*' and '*insider conversion*' respectively.¹

'Conversion' as a biblical word

A study in English of 'conversion in the Bible' is initially hampered by the disappointing (and surprising) discovery that the word 'conversion' occurs only *once* in traditional English versions (e.g. AV, RSV, NASB, NKJV), and not at all in the NIV and GNB; the single traditional use is in *Acts 15:3*, where it represents the only use in the NT of the Greek noun *epistrophe*. There are not many more uses of the verb 'convert' (AV 12, RSV none, NASB 3, NKJV 4, GNB 3, NIV 1 [*Acts 15:3* again!]), and the noun 'convert' (AV 1, RSV 4, NASB 2, NKJV none, GNB 4, NIV 7).

It would be easy to conclude from the infrequency of the use of these words that conversion was not a subject of importance to the biblical writers; easy, but quite wrong! The days are fortunately long past when the simple use of a concordance was believed to be an appropriate way to discover the biblical teaching on a given subject. Few theological themes of any importance can be adequately traced by the study of a single word-group even in the original languages, still less in English.

It would in fact be hard to find a better example of the inadequacy of 'word-study' as an approach to understanding the teaching of the Bible than the subject of conversion. I was interested to see that

¹ Works listed in the Bibliography are cited by author's name only. B. R. Gaventa, pp. 9-12, 148-9, distinguishes three types of 'conversion': 'pendulum-like conversion' (which 'involves a negation of the past and a drastic change'), 'transformation' (which 'does not require a rejection or negation of the past', but 'involves a new perception, a re-cognition, of the past'), and 'alternation' (a transfer to another religious group which, however, 'does not involve a rejection of the past and, indeed, actually develops out of one's past'). The addition of this third category certainly serves to indicate that there are many shades of continuity and discontinuity involved in different patterns of conversion, and no doubt other such sub-categories should be added for a fully satisfying analysis, but for our purposes the 'insider' and 'outsider' distinction will serve.

'conversion' is not listed at all in the very extensive subject-index of Guthrie's *New Testament Theology*, presumably because the *term* is not a prominent one in the theological discourse of the NT; but of course the book contains a full discussion of the *subject*, largely under the heading 'The Christian Life: the beginnings', where the subdivisions focus on the words 'repentance', 'faith', 'forgiveness', with an additional note on 'regeneration'. What *we* mean by 'conversion' is expressed in many different biblical words and images, and is clearly fundamental to the theological structure of the NT, but a study of the 'conversion' word-group in English would not take us very far into the subject.

I shall accordingly offer some brief comments on some of the relevant Hebrew and Greek words, and then go on to consider the subject in broader terms.

'Turning' in the Old Testament

Despite the fact that neither the RSV nor the NIV uses any of the 'conversion' word-group *at all* in the OT, it is in fact easier to propose a single word as a Hebrew equivalent for this idea than is the case in the NT. That word is the very common verb *shubh*, usually translated into English by 'turn', 'return' or the like (and in the LXX by *epistrepheo*, which we shall meet in the next section). Like the English verb 'turn', it has a very wide range of uses, and most of its 1000+ occurrences are of no theological interest. But it is frequently used (over 100 times) in connection with men's relationship with God, particularly in the context of Israel's covenant with Yahweh.

Both individuals and (especially) Israel as a community are called upon to 'turn away' from evil or from other gods and to 'return' to God. It is a characteristic theme both of the Deuteronomic writings and of many of the prophets that Israel, which is God's people by covenant, is constantly liable to 'turn away' from God (e.g. Jer. 2:27; 11:10), and needs to be summoned to 'return' (Hos. 6:1; 14:1 etc.).

Generally the verb is used intransitively, but sometimes there is an agent, either God (e.g. Ps. 80:4, 7, 14, 19) or someone else (prophets, Neh. 9:26; priest, Mal. 2:6) who must turn Israel back to their true loyalty. There is, therefore, a dual aspect to this OT idea of 'conversion', both God 'turning' people and people 'turning' to God, which is summed up in Jeremiah 31:18, literally 'Turn me back and I will be turned', or, as Schniewind beautifully translates it, 'Bring me home, then shall I go home'.²

² J. Schniewind, p. 269; cf. G. Bertram, *TDNT* VII, 724.

In terms of my original definition, this is 'insider conversion', the people of God being summoned to be true to the covenant relationship already established. Even when they have been attracted to the worship of other gods, the presupposition appears to be that this is a temporary aberration, that all the time they have been 'really' God's people underneath. The covenant context is crucial to an understanding of the significance of *shubh*.

Just occasionally the verb is used in a non-Israelite context, as in Jonah 3:8, 10, where the Ninevites 'turn from' their wickedness, which they recognise as being evil even though outside a covenant context. It is clear, of course, that the OT does hope for the 'conversion' of the Gentiles, as the blessings of Abraham spread to 'all the families of the earth' (Gen. 12:3 etc.) and Israel fulfils her role to be a 'light to the nations' (Is. 42:6; 49:6). But this hope is generally expressed within the context of the special role of Israel as the people of God, and therefore of 'coming' to share in Israel's blessings rather than of 'conversion to God' in isolation. It was the natural development of this conception that by the New Testament period the missionary concern of Jews was focused on the making of 'proselytes', ie. Gentiles who, as far as practicable, 'became Jews'.³

Thus while I have indicated that *shubh* is probably the nearest Hebrew equivalent to our term 'conversion, it operates in a different context of thought from that of Christian evangelism. It focuses not on a decisive 'change of religion', nor even on a personal transformation of religious experience through a once-only crisis, but rather on the maintenance of an existing covenant relationship through continual 'turning' from evil to God, a process in which both God and the individual (or more typically the community as a whole) have a part.⁴ The difference of atmosphere is well summed up in the description of Josiah's entire life as one of 'turning (*shubh*) to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses' (2 Kings 23:25). It looks as if Josiah had no need for a word to express what we mean by 'conversion'!

³ It is interesting to note that most of the uses of 'convert' in NIV and GNB refer not to those who become Christians, but to 'converts to Judaism', translating the four NT uses of *proselytos*

⁴ This use of *shubh* to denote the attitude of the true people of God is found still in use at Qumran, where the members of the community have pledged themselves to 'turn from all evil' and to 'turn to the law of Moses' (1QS 5:1, 8), so that they have entered a 'covenant of turning' (CD 19:16) and their priests are described as 'the converts of Israel' (CD 4:2).

New Testament words

The Greek word usually used in the LXX to translate *shubh* is *epistrepho*, and this is a natural place to begin looking for 'conversion'-language in the NT. Half of its 36 occurrences are in a non-literal, potentially 'theological', sense, the majority of these being in the writings of Luke. It generally functions as an intransitive verb: people 'turn' themselves (the only exceptions are Luke 1:16, 17; James 5:19, 20).

Several uses of the verb are derived directly from OT uses of *shubh* (Mt. 13:15; Mk. 4:12; Acts 28:27 and Jn. 12:40 [*strepho* instead of *epistrepho*] all quote Is. 6:10; Luke 1:16, 17 allude to Malachi 4:6). In some other cases the verb applies to a change within the life of a disciple: they must 'change' to accept the revolutionary values of the kingdom of heaven⁵ (Mt. 18:3, using *strepho* rather than *epistrepho*); Peter will 'return' after his failure (Lk. 22:32); and in James 5:19, 20 the verb is used of a Christian's action in 'bringing back' an erring fellow-Christian. In the remaining NT uses of *epistrepho* the context indicates a meaning virtually the same as our use of 'conversion', to refer to non-Christians becoming Christians (with reference to Jews: Acts 3:19; 9:35; 2 Cor. 3:16; with reference to Gentiles: Acts 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18; 1 Thess. 1:9; in Acts 26:20 it refers explicitly to both Jews and Gentiles). The same sense is clearly found in the one use of the noun *epistrophe* in Acts 15:3, 'the conversion of the Gentiles'. The use of the passive form of the verb in 1 Peter 2:25 probably has the same sense, though the situation from which the readers have 'turned' is less specific.

A full 'outsider conversion' meaning for *epistrepho* is spelled out particularly in three of the above passages. The Thessalonians have 'turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God' (1 Thess. 1:9), the Lycaonians are called on to 'turn from these vain things to a living God' (Acts 14:15), and Paul's mission to the Gentiles is 'to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me' (Acts 26:18). All these passages specify what is implicit in all such uses, that conversion is both 'from' and 'to', replacing an old way of life and an old loyalty with a new and opposite allegiance.

Conversion, then, or at least 'outsider conversion', can be seen as involving two elements, 'from' and 'to'. Each of these elements has its own vocabulary in the NT, the key word-groups being respectively

⁵ This aspect of 'turning' as an essential condition of discipleship is forcefully presented by J. Sobrino in a section of his *Christology at the Crossroads* (ET. London: SCM, 1978) entitled 'Conversion and the Kingdom of God', pp. 55-60.

metanoeo, 'repent' and *pisteuo*, 'believe'. And each of these terms is far more common in the NT than *epistrepho*; sometimes the two are used together to denote the full 'conversion process' (e.g. Mk. 1:15; Acts 20:21). They are 'opposite sides of the same coin'.⁶ A study of the NT teaching on conversion must necessarily include the use of these terms, and particularly the former.

It is often suggested that the etymology of *metanoeo* ('change of mind') indicates a fuller meaning than the mainly negative connotations of our word 'repent'; indeed it has been proposed that 'conversion' might often serve better than 'repentance' as a translation for *metanoia*. 'The word "repent" really means "to be converted"'.⁷ While the LXX did not use *metanoeo* to translate *shubh*, in the NT it has come to cover much of the same field of meaning, and it is arguable that *metanoeo* is a more directly relevant word-group than *epistrepho* for the study of the NT idea of conversion. The two verbs occur together with no very clear difference in meaning in Acts 3:19; 26:20. Sometimes *metanoia* is used where we might expect a noun like *epistrophe*, to indicate the complete process of conversion (e.g. Acts 11:18; 26:20). This is not to suggest that the sense of sin is not central to what *metanoeo* describes, but that the word carries with it more of the new relationship with God which replaces the rule of sin than is normally involved when we speak of 'repentance'.

No one word could hope, however, to capture all that becoming a Christian meant, and it is not surprising that different NT authors preferred different terminology. Paul seldom speaks of *metanoia*, and the Johannine writings not at all except for Revelation. But both Paul and John speak constantly of *pistis* 'faith'—or rather, in the case of John, the verb *pisteuo* 'believe'. The news about the Thessalonians' conversion from idols to serve a living and true God' (1 Thess. 1:9) is summarised in the preceding verse as 'your faith in God' (cf Rom. 1:8 for a similar use). The members of Paul's churches are described simply as 'those who believe' (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:21 etc.), and he looks back to their coming to Christ as the time when 'you believed' (1 Cor. 15:2, 11). John uses the same verb to describe the 'conversion' of the Samaritans (4:39) and of those Jews who became adherents of Jesus (11:45, 48; 12:11, 42, etc.), and uses 'believe in his name' as a virtual synonym for 'receive Jesus' (1:12). So it is only those who 'believe' who will receive the blessings of salvation (3:16; 11:25ff, etc.).

But even the study of the three important word-groups *epistrepho*,

⁶ J. D. G. Dunn, p. 91.

⁷ Schniewind, p. 270

metanoeo and *pisteuo* only begins to cover the NT language about conversion. The experience of a new beginning which is essential to what 'conversion' means is expressed in the vivid metaphor of being born again,⁸ which occurs not only in the writings of John (Jn. 1:13; 3:3-8; 1 Jn. 2:29; 3:9f; 4:7; 5:4, 18) but also in Peter (1 Pet. 1:3, 23; 2:2), James (1:18) and Paul (Tit. 3:5), of resurrection with Christ into new life (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 3:1-4), of putting off the old clothes and putting on the new (Col. 3:9-10; Gal. 3:27), of a change of ownership (Rom. 6:17-18), of moving from darkness into light (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Jn. 2:9-11), from death to life (Jn. 5:24; Eph. 2:1-6), and many more.

It was an experience which called forth all the inventiveness of religious vocabulary to try to give adequate expression to something beyond words. The overriding theme is that of transformation, of newness, summed up most forcefully in Paul's crisp declaration in 2 Cor. 5:17, 'If anyone is in Christ, new creation! The old is gone; look, there is new!' And all that without using the word 'conversion'!

So while a study of NT 'conversion'-words can give us a start in grasping the subject, we need to go further and consider what was actually happening to Jews and Gentiles in their encounter with Christ in the first century if we are to do justice to our theme.

The call to Israel

The call to 'repent' which was the hallmark of the preaching of John the Baptist would have sounded familiar enough to any Jew who knew the OT prophets; it is a classic case of the use of *shubh* in calling Israel back to its true covenant allegiance, and is well summed up in the angel's announcement to his father in Luke 1:16, 17; it is a 'converting' ministry, but in the context, apparently, of 'insider conversion', turning the sons of Israel back to their God.

Jesus too came as the Messiah of Israel, to establish the reign of

⁸ The phrase 'born again' is so firmly entrenched in English that it is probably useless to question whether we may not have fixed on the wrong meaning of the Greek phrase as used in Jn. 3:3, 7. As is well known *anōthen* means both 'again' and (more literally) 'from above'. Such double meanings are a well-known feature of John, and often there is an ironical purpose in their use. In this case B. R. Gaventa, pp. 133-134, suggests that Nicodemus' inept reply in v.4 is meant to be seen as wrong precisely because he has focused on the time-element, 'again', without grasping that it is a different type of birth, 'from above', that Jesus is talking about. Thus, says Gaventa, 'The irony continues in contemporary Christianity, since the meaning of *anōthen* that Jesus rejects has become a dominant way of describing conversion.'

God among his people.⁹ His statement of his mission 'to seek and to save the lost' was spoken in connection with the restoration of a 'son of Abraham' (Lk. 19:9–10), and was modeled on Ezekiel's vision of God's concern for the lost sheep of Israel (Ezek. 34:1–16; cf. Mt. 10:5f; 15:24 for this restriction to the mission both of Jesus and of his disciples). Jesus did not call on his Jewish hearers to join a new religion, but to discover again the relationship with God which should always have been theirs.

This is not in the least to undervalue the radical transformation which this must mean in the lives of those who responded to his call. It was indeed a 'conversion' they needed, but it was an 'insider conversion',¹⁰ the sort which Matthew 18:3 is talking about when the acceptance of the status of children is described as 'turning round', or as we might say 're-orientation'. As J. Jeremias comments on this passage, 'Repentance means learning to say *Abba* again, putting one's whole trust in the heavenly Father, returning to the Father's house and the Father's arms. . . . The repentance of the lost son consists in finding his way home to his father.'¹¹

Even if it did not mean a 'change of religion' in any sociological sense, this calls to repentance, which was at the heart of Jesus' gospel (Mk. 1:15), involved a radical change. This is illustrated in the twin parables of the treasure and the pearl (Mt. 13:44–46), which put into story form the 'newness' theme of 2 Corinthians 5:17. It is the sort of reorientation which Paul describes in Philippians 3:4–11, whereby

⁹ This aspect of Jesus' ministry, while never completely forgotten, has tended to be underemphasised in Christian interpretation. Recent NT scholarship has been increasingly bringing it back to attention. See e.g. such works as J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *The Proclamation of Jesus* (ET. London: SCM, 1971); J. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980); A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (London: Duckworth, 1982). To my mind the most impressive recent demonstration of the 'Israel-focus' of Jesus' ministry is B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979). Similar insights are prominent in E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), though Sanders' idiosyncratic approach to historical reconstruction renders his account ultimately less satisfying.

¹⁰ Our terminology of 'insider'/'outsider conversion' was, of course, derived from the current situation, and is not necessarily directly applicable to the situation of the New Testament. In particular, while it is in one sense correct to speak of Jesus calling Jews to fulfil their Jewish heritage as 'insider conversion', the fact that this involved recognising a particular person as the Messiah, something previously not part of Jewish experience, adds a dimension of newness which already strains the 'insider' category even before the church became recognised as distinct from Judaism.

¹¹ J. Jeremias, p. 156; pp. 152–156 provide a valuable survey of Jesus' teaching on repentance.

the noble values of the past are relegated to the status of garbage in comparison with the new values and aspirations found 'in Christ'.

The radical discontinuity involved in this call to repentance and reorientation was graphically expressed in John's choice of *baptism* as the symbol of his 'converts' response. While there is much debate over the possible antecedents for John's baptism, I believe that the only really comparable rite likely to have been known to his Jewish hearers at the time was the baptism of a proselyte.¹² When a Gentile wanted to 'become a Jew', a once-for-all act of baptism served to prepare him for his 'new life'. But as far as we know no-one had previously proposed that *Jews* should be baptised in this once-for-all way. And John made his point too clear to be missed when he anticipated their horrified reaction, and stated that to be a 'child of Abraham' was no guarantee of safety in the coming judgement, but only a repentance which bears fruit (Mt. 3:8–10). Even Jews must be prepared to 'start again'; the people of God need to be reborn.

The same discontinuity runs through Jesus' teaching (and presumably should be seen also in the continued Christian use of baptism as the symbol of a new beginning). The messianic banquet at which the Jewish patriarchs will preside will be attended by 'many from east and west', while Jews who expected to be there by right will find themselves excluded (Mt. 8:11–12). A series of three devastating parables in Matthew 21:28–22:14 focuses on this theme of replacement, whereby those who thought themselves the obedient son, the lawful tenants, and the invited guests will find the tables turned, when 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it' (Mt. 21:43). None of this is to suggest that Gentiles as such will replace Israel, or that Jews must become something else, but rather that Jewishness alone will not suffice, that the characteristic of the true people of God is not their genetic or community status, but a 'fruitful' relationship with God—a relationship which is now open to non-Jews as well as to Jews. This same tension between the continuity of 'Israel' and the discontinuity involved in the rejection of those who prove not to be 'true Israel' runs throughout the NT, coming to a head in Paul's agonised discussion of the place of the Jews in Roman 9–11, with its illuminating allegory of the olive tree (Rom. 11:17–24). Some branches remain on the parent stock, others are grafted in from

¹² A brief summary of the evidence with regard to proselyte baptism may be found in *NIDNTT* 1, 145, 154–5. The classic 1940 study by H. H. Rowley, reprinted in his *From Moses to Qumran* (London: Lutterworth, 1963) 211–235, remains a valuable analysis of the data.

outside, but the tree remains 'Israel'. What determines the health of a branch is faith (v. 20).

So the gospel must be preached, and salvation is available, 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (Rom. 1:16). The earliest Christian preaching (and of course almost the whole of Jesus' ministry which preceded it) was to Jews, and from the beginning it culminated in a call to repentance and to a new beginning. In Acts 2:38 the formula is 'Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ', and the (apparently) immediate baptism of those who responded (2:41) was the mark of their membership of a definite community of the followers of Jesus, even though that community continued to be seen as a part of the Jewish people, sharing in the worship of the temple and subject to the disciplinary authority of the Sanhedrin. It was a community still so naturally aware of itself as 'Israel' that when the question of the admission of Gentile converts later arose it caused long and bitter debate, a debate which was never finally resolved, but which resulted in the separate existence for several centuries of a continuing conservative Jewish Christianity, or 'Ebionism', for which following Jesus was the true culmination of Judaism, and Gentiles who wished to follow Jesus must do so as Jewish proselytes.¹³

But the strand of Christianity which became definitive was that which arose out of Peter's experience with Cornelius (Acts 10-11),¹⁴ out of the Gentile evangelism of the Antioch Christians (Acts 11:20-26), and out of the subsequent ministry of Paul, which was accepted in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), and which resulted in the recognition of Gentile followers of Jesus as members of the people of God in their own right, without needing first to become Jews. While Jesus' personal ministry had been deliberately focused on his own Jewish people, he had equally clearly pointed forward to this redefinition of the people of God (Mt. 8:5-12; 28:18-20 etc.). So the separate identity and self-consciousness of this new community grew, and it was not very long before non-Christian Jews came to recognise it as a rival; even the Roman emperor identified Christians

¹³ Our knowledge of the Ebionite movement is sketchy, and largely derived from what their 'orthodox' opponents had to say about them. For an interesting recent attempt to rehabilitate them as the true original form of Christianity see H. Maccoby, *The Mythmaker* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1986), ch. 15 (Maccoby writes as a Jew who wants to 'reclaim' Jesus, and blames all the features of Christianity which distinguish it from Judaism on Paul, whom the Ebionites similarly anathematised!).

¹⁴ B. R. Gaventa, pp. 107ff, while discussing conversion accounts in Acts, intriguingly entitles this section 'Cornelius—or Peter?', her argument being that while the story deals with the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius, the focus of interest is on the 'conversion' of Peter (and through him of other Jewish Christians) to the recognition that Gentiles may be accepted as believers on a level with Jews.

as a distinct community by the mid-sixties.¹⁵ By about 85 the separation of Jews and Christians had become so irrevocable that a 'curse' on Christians and other heretics was included in the regular synagogue liturgy,¹⁶ and it is reasonable to suppose that long before that time in many areas the situation was such that John's readers would have found no difficulty in identifying with his references to being 'put out of the synagogue' because of loyalty to Jesus (Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2).

Thus what had begun as a movement calling Jews to return to God ('insider conversion') eventually came to demand not only a new experience of God but also a change of religious affiliation ('outsider conversion'). This development was due not to any change in the nature of the gospel or in the basis of a saving relationship with God, but to the recognition both by the Christians themselves and by the Jewish community from which they derived that a new community had come into existence, which demanded a loyalty incompatible with continuing adherence to the parent group. Each would, no doubt, claim with equal conviction to be the 'true' Israel, but their respective understandings of what that meant had become mutually exclusive. The symbolism already inherent in John's demand that Jews should be baptised to become 'true Israel' had worked itself out to the point where Christian baptism marked for the Jew a decisive break with the old and the entry to a new community.

Outside the covenant boundary

In the case of Jewish evangelism the line between 'insider' and 'outsider' conversion is necessarily blurred in the NT, as the writings span the period during which Christian self-consciousness developed. That is why it is not helpful to ask, as is sometimes done, at what stage the original disciples of Jesus 'were converted', and to expect an answer in terms of our own experiences and expectations of conversion today. No doubt God could tell us at what stage Peter was

¹⁵ Tacitus, *Annals* XV 44 (Nero's use of the Christians in Rome as the scapegoat for the fire of Rome in AD64). Cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2.

¹⁶ The clause, known as the *Birkath ha-Minim*, ran as follows: 'Let Nazarenes [Christians] and *minim* [heretics] perish in a moment, let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and let them not be written with the righteous'. It was inserted into the authorised version of the Eighteen Benedictions some time after AD70; a date around 85 is usually assumed, though without specific evidence. See further E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 2 (new ed., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 455–463. There is no reason to believe that the official authorisation of this insertion represented a totally new development; it is more likely to have been the culmination of a hostility developed over several decades.

'born again', but he has not seen fit to do so, and it would be a bold man who tried to fill the gap. If Peter had been a Greek it might have been easier to do so, but Peter was a Jew who responded as a Jew to a call from a Jewish prophet, and who only gradually came to realise that something more fundamental had happened than a return to covenant obedience.

Even with a Gentile, the line is not entirely clear, because while some Gentiles 'became Jews' through proselyte conversion, others were attracted to Judaism and accepted its basic moral and religious values while remaining outside the Jewish community. One such was Cornelius (Acts 10:1-4, 34-35). In his case the time of conversion seems clear enough; it was as Peter spoke to him and his family that 'the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word', and Peter and his Jewish companions recognised in this an appropriate basis for immediate baptism as Christians. And for Peter and his companions it is clear that this was 'outsider conversion', so much so that it required the 'conversion' of the Jerusalem church for them to accept it at all. But for Cornelius this was not so much a radical break with the past as a 'natural' progress from his religious experience so far. Socially speaking he was indeed an outsider, but in terms of his religious status, while not a member of the covenant community, he already shared much of their practice and belief.

'Godfearing' Gentiles like Cornelius figure elsewhere in Acts, and some of them seem to have been similarly responsive to the gospel (Acts 16:14; 17:4; 18:7). But generally the 'conversion of the Gentiles' (Acts 15:3) must have involved a more clear-cut transfer of religious affiliation, and one which led to an immediately perceived change of life and of loyalty. 1 Peter in particular bears witness to the way some of these early Christians in Asia Minor, probably mainly Gentiles, found themselves alienated from their former associates by the Christian allegiance (esp. 2:11-12; 3:13-17; 4:3-4, 14-16).

One of the great strengths of the gospel message was the way it broke down community barriers, including those of race and of religious affiliation. Paul often makes a point of this. In Galatians 3:27-29 the basis of unity is 'baptism into Christ'; what has replaced the old divisions listed in v. 28 is not so much a new creed as simply 'putting on Christ'. The result is not that they have become Jews, for v. 28 rules out that way of seeing things, but that all in Christ, whatever their pedigree, are equally 'Abraham's offspring', sharing in the blessings of the people of God. Ephesians 2 makes the point even more strongly: their former condition is described as a Jew might well have spoken of the 'lost' condition of the Gentiles (vv. 1-3), but the grace of God has not only given them personal and heavenly salvation 'in Christ Jesus' (vv. 4-10), but has also broken

the community barrier and integrated them with Jewish believers as equal members of the household of God (vv. 11–21). Seen from the standpoint of Israel they had been ‘far off’, ‘alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world’ (vv. 12–13). They were ‘outsiders’ indeed; but ‘in Christ Jesus’ all that has changed.

The style of approach which is appropriate to insiders and outsiders may be very different, as the different preaching styles of Acts vividly illustrate, and as Paul spells out in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. But the salvation on offer is the same, and the result of its acceptance is not one community of converted Jews and another of converted Gentiles, but ‘one new person in place of the two’ (Eph. 2:15). That this new community is ‘Abraham’s offspring’, the true fulfilment of the hopes and promises of Israel, does not make it a Jewish preserve. The old covenant boundary no longer applies; all have become ‘insiders’ in Christ.

Thus in so far as the distinction between ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ conversion has any meaning in the NT, it is at the sociological level of where a person comes from, and the degree of dislocation involved in their joining the community of faith; at the theological level of what makes a true Christian, and in the new life and community which results, there is no distinction.

Patterns of conversion

The attempt is sometimes made to analyse what are the main ‘components’ in the biblical idea of conversion. It is interesting that in three recent attempts to do so each has isolated three main elements, though the three points offered are different. For E. M. B. Green¹⁷ they are *repentance, faith and baptism*; for J. D. G. Dunn¹⁸, *repentance, water-baptism and the gift of the Spirit*; for J. Dupont,¹⁹ *a sense of sin, an awareness of the mystery of Easter, and a change of life*.²⁰

Few would wish to dispute the presence of all these elements in a NT view of conversion; some would wish to add others. There is a

¹⁷ E. M. B. Green, pp. 151–152.

¹⁸ Dunn, p. 91, introducing his discussion of ‘conversion-initiation in Acts’. Similarly S. S. Smalley, p. 203.

¹⁹ J. Dupont, pp. 61–62; this analysis is used as the structural principle for the ensuing study of ‘Conversion in Acts’.

²⁰ J. D. Pawson, p. 11, discerns four elements in ‘Christian initiation’; his list in fact combines those of Green and Dunn just mentioned: ‘repenting towards God, believing in the Lord Jesus, being baptised in water, and receiving the Holy Spirit’. These ‘Four Spiritual Doors’ form the basis for his whole discussion.

variety both in the accounts of specific conversions and in the doctrinal statements relating to conversion in the NT which suggests caution in trying to express it all in a few brief statements. Without attempting to offer a complete systematisation of the material, however, I would like to pick out a few points where the NT does seem to me to offer some unity of approach, or, in some cases, to pose us alternative patterns which appear to be equally valid.

1. *Conversion is not an end in itself.* It is often remarked that the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 speaks of 'making disciples', not 'making converts'. Conversion is the beginning of a new life. Paul's conversion was a call to mission (Acts 26:16–18 etc.); so is other Christians' conversion. Paul's converts turned from idols to serve a living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9); Peter's readers had become God's own people 'That you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet. 2:9). Conversion is 'an exclusive change of faith, of ethic and of cult'.²¹ Dupont makes 'change of life' one of the three essentials of conversion: 'A new Christian has to become a member of the community and to identify with its distinctive way of serving God'²²

2. *The motivation of conversion.* This may be quite varied, of course, but prominent in NT accounts is the sense of sin and the need for forgiveness and a restored relationship with God. This element is central to the early evangelistic sermons in Jerusalem (Acts 2:23, 36, 38; 3:14–15, 19). While we have seen that 'repent' in the NT covers more than just a sense of sin, it is never less than that, even when Paul speaks to pagans with no knowledge of the OT law (Acts 17:30–31), and the whole argument of Romans 1–3 is devoted to showing that no one is exempt from the need for forgiveness. It is this sense of sin and of the judgement of God that sets Christian conversion apart from the intellectual and moral reorientation which for instance a Stoic teacher might require.²³

3. *Human and divine in conversion.* We have observed that the verb *epistrepheo* when used in the sense of religious conversion is generally an intransitive verb—people 'convert' rather than 'are converted'. Superficially this might suggest that conversion is simply a matter of human decision and persuasion. Here is a point where simple word-study can be dangerously misleading, and the NT writers would have been horrified at such a conclusion. Theologians sometimes try to mend matters by distinguishing rigidly between

²¹ E. M. B. Green, p. 146.

²² J. Dupont, p. 84.

²³ See J. N. Sevenster, esp. pp. 260–262.

'conversion' (what a man does) and 'regeneration' (what God does), and then discussing whether the chicken or the egg comes first. But this is to try to tie down living language into an artificial system. The NT has many ways of indicating that it is the Spirit of God that moves a person to 'turn', and that the resultant new life is 'born of God'; it would be irresponsible to allow the accident that the Greek verb *epistrepheo* functions differently from our verb 'convert' to obscure the basic NT theological truth of the divine initiative in conversion.²⁴

4. *The Spirit and conversion.* The point just made that it is the Spirit of God who initiates the conversion process would, I think, be generally agreed to represent NT teaching. But what about the reception of the Spirit by the believer? Is this also a part of conversion? If so, what are we to make of claims, both theological and experiential, that for some Christians the reception of ('baptism in') the Spirit is a subsequent and separate stage? It was this question which primarily motivated J. D. G. Dunn's important NT study of *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, and he answers unequivocally that the gift of (and reception of) the Spirit is viewed throughout the NT as an integral part (indeed the essential part) of the process of 'conversion-initiation'. Whatever the explanation of the quite varied pattern of the manifestation of the Spirit's presence in the conversion narratives in Acts, the idea of a converted person who is without the Spirit is, he argues, a theological anomaly. I am not aware that this aspect of his thesis has been disproved as a true account of NT teaching, however uncomfortably it may fit with some modern viewpoints and experiences.

5. *The place of baptism.* We have noticed that both Green and Dunn include baptism in their selection of the three main elements in conversion. Smalley offers a brief analysis of the five accounts of individual conversions in Acts (the Ethiopian, Saul, Cornelius, Lydia, and the Philippian jailer), and points out that while there are various elements in common between several of these accounts, the only one common to them all is the baptism of the convert.²⁵ In Acts baptism seems regularly to have taken place immediately, as part of the conversion process, rather than as a sequel after lengthy preparation. The form of Peter's 'appeal' at Pentecost, 'Repent', and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of

²⁴ Most writers on the NT view of conversion rightly stress the importance of the divine initiative; see e.g. E. M. B. Green, pp. 148–9; B. R. Gaventa, p. 151. J. D. G. Dunn, pp. 90–91, 224 interestingly divides the three basic elements he sees in conversion between the three different agents involved: repentance is the work of the convert, baptism that of the community, and the gift of the Spirit that of God; his thesis is concerned to insist that none of the three should be undervalued.

²⁵ S. S. Smalley, pp. 200–201.

your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38) is strikingly different from modern evangelistic formulae, and seems uncomfortably out of keeping with much present-day evangelical theology, but represents the regular NT approach. Our tendency to see baptism as a symbolic optional extra, or to be embarrassed by the inclusion of a physical act as part of the spiritual process of conversion, contrasts with the strongly 'realist' language of the NT about the saving significance of baptism (e.g. Jn. 3:5; Rom. 6:3–4; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:20–21). While there are no NT grounds for believing that baptism *by itself* makes a person a Christian, the idea of an unbaptised Christian is equally foreign to its thought. 'Without it [baptism] a believer did not enter the primitive community of faith'.²⁶

6. *Mass conversions?* The call to 'turn' in the OT was generally addressed to Israel as a whole. The whole community is depicted as turning away from God and turning back in repentance. In Acts the Christian movement is launched by the conversion of large numbers of Jews at one time (2:41; 4:4), though alongside these 'mass conversions' the day to day accretion of individuals to the church went on (2:47; 5:14; 6:7). Large numbers believed as a result of Philip's Samaritan mission (8:6–13) and of Peter's visits to Lydda and Joppa (9:35, 42), though there is no indication of how far this was the result of 'mass conversions' and how far of steady addition of individuals; it is noticeable, however, that in Acts after the initial 'mass conversions' the focus seems to fall increasingly on individual conversion accounts. It is in any case artificial to distinguish between the conversion of large numbers at once and of successive individuals, as if these were in principle different, because in all such cases the result was not that a whole community 'changed sides' en masse, but rather that individuals and their families, whether in large or small numbers, were gathered into a new community self-consciously distinct from the society to which they had belonged, and which as a whole remained unconverted. I see no evidence in the NT

²⁶ S. S. Smalley, p. 203. See further the useful summaries of the relation between baptism and conversion in Dunn pp. 227–228 and Green pp. 152–156. A more radical proposal for revision of our understanding of the place of baptism in the light of NT practice is offered by R. Brow, 'Go Make Learners': *A New Model for Discipleship in the Church* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1981). Brow describes baptism as 'the introduction into the sphere or school of the Holy Spirit' and proposes (and practises) an evangelical policy of open baptism of all who come as enquirers even before they have reached the stage of a thought-out confession of faith. (J. I. Packer is quoted as saying, 'Some books can be safely ignored, but not this one!')

for the conversion of whole communities such as has been a feature of subsequent missionary experience in some parts of the world.

7. *Is conversion always sudden?* The classic sudden conversion is that of Saul (though even there the process lasted over three days, 'one single experience lasting from the Damascus road to the ministry of Ananias'²⁷); but were all NT conversions like that? Sudden conversions make more impressive stories, and it is hardly surprising that they feature prominently both in the NT and in subsequent Christian literature. But even in Acts there are puzzling cases such as Apollos and the Ephesian dozen (18:24–28; 19:1–7), whose conversion seems to have involved a number of stages, not to mention many about whom we know nothing of when and how they came to faith, such as Timothy (Acts 16:1–3), of the importance of whose childhood instruction in the faith Paul speaks in 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15.

The 'once-born', those brought up within a Christian context who need no 'conversion experience', are not so likely to appear directly in Acts, which deals largely with the first generation of converts, but there seems no reason to suppose that the NT writers would have viewed them with suspicion. What matters is not so much the means or the experience of conversion, but the state of 'convertedness', however reached. The tests of true Christian status proposed in 1 John focus not on a past event but on present characteristics of 'walking in the light', 'keeping his commandments', 'loving the brothers', 'doing what is right' and the like; such a person is 'born of God' and 'has passed out of death into life'—in other words 'is converted'.²⁸

It is worth noting in this connection that 'transformation' language in the NT is applied to the continuation of the Christian life as well as to its beginning. Paul's appeal in Romans 12:2 to 'be transformed by the renewal of your mind' (surely typical 'conversion' language) is addressed to *Christians* (and if it is right to read so much out of the present tense of the imperative, they are to be so transformed *continuously*). Jesus' call to 'turn' and become like children (Mt. 18:3) was addressed to those who were already his disciples, and there is nothing in the context to indicate that he was calling them to an initial 'conversion' experience; few of us would dare claim that this is not a call we need to heed constantly in our Christian lives.

²⁷ Dunn p. 77, summing up the argument of his chapter 6.

²⁸ See further S. S. Smalley, pp. 208–9.

The language of 'putting off' and 'putting on' which apparently refers to a past event in Colossians 3:9f and Galatians 3:27 becomes an exhortation to present behaviour in Colossians 3:12 and Romans 13:14. Human nature is so much opposed to the values of the kingdom of God that those who are already 'converted' need to go on being transformed, 'turning' to the values of our new allegiance, as Josiah did throughout his life.

8. *'Outsider' and 'insider' conversion.* We must finally return briefly to the distinction with which we began. I hope the last paragraphs have shown that while this distinction may be given great sociological significance, it is theologically unimportant. It is not the nature of the change which matters, but the resulting 'changedness'. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:17 apply as much to the 'insider' who has found new life in Christ as to the dramatic convert from another religious group. 'Outsider'/'insider' is a distinction in terms of a person's previous situation, not in terms of the end-product; all stand equally in need of 'convertedness', and through it all become one 'in Christ Jesus'.

What lies behind this distinction is simply the issue of whether or not there is a distinct community of the people of God within which a person may be brought up. In OT Israel this was clearly the case, and therefore since the vast majority of uses of *shubh* are within the covenant community, the focus is on 'insider conversion'. In the NT when the gospel is preached to Jews this remains the case, for so long as Christianity is not perceived as a separate religious community from Judaism. But as the separation becomes increasingly clear, the conversion of Jews is increasingly seen as that of 'outsiders' (as of course the conversion of Gentiles was necessarily from the start). But within the NT period we are still too close to the beginnings of the Christian movement for the new community to have developed to any significant extent its own fringe area of uncommitted adherents; the 'nominal Christian' has not yet become a familiar figure. When he does so, the need for 'insider conversion' again arises, and has been with us ever since.

Abstract

A variety of Hebrew and Greek words are used in the Bible to convey the concept of 'conversion'. The New Testament recognises both 'insider conversion' and 'outsider conversion'—the former being a call to return to their God and the latter demanding both a new experience of God and a change of religious affiliation. The distinction rests on where a person comes from and the degree of

dislocation involved in joining the community of faith. Nevertheless, within the new community the distinction is theologically unimportant. As the church became increasingly separate from Judaism, the conversion of Jews was seen more and more as 'outsider conversion'; with the growth of 'nominal Christianity' the need for 'insider conversion' has redeveloped.

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