Seven

THE TRUE MEANING OF CONVERSION

It is evident on every page of Luke’s history that early Christianity spread by making converts. Not so obvious, perhaps, today, is what the term conversion really means; for in the intervening centuries the matter has become confused.

In the Dark Ages, for instance, pagan kings, professing conversion to Christianity, sometimes compelled their subjects to submit to baptism, since they thought that simply performing this rite on people immediately turned them all, willing or unwilling, into Christians. More extreme methods were used at a later date. Jews in Spain, for example, were given the choice of converting to Christianity, or being burned at the stake. But this kind of thing is not what early Christianity understood by conversion. All forced conversion, whether to a religion or to a political ideology, is, of course, tyrannically evil. Forced conversion to Christianity is, in addition, a contradiction in terms. For Christianity insists on the integrity of the individual’s moral judgment and freedom of choice.

A second confusion that arose in post-apostolic times was that if a nation or a family converted to Christianity, its descendants did not themselves need to be converted: they were automatically Christians, and remained so, unless they personally opted out.

A third, much more general confusion nowadays, is that all people everywhere, being creatures of God, are also children of God, and need no conversion. But Christ himself drew a sharp distinction between physical birth—by which we become creatures of God, and spiritual rebirth—by which we become children of God. We have no choice in our physical birth; but, according to Christ, our spiritual re-birth is only possible by conscious, personal repentance and acceptance of him as Saviour and Lord (see 1 Jn. 1:8-9; 3:1-16).

In this connection, Luke’s narrative is particularly instructive. He not only tells us that, from time to time, crowds of people got converted; but at 8:4–9:30 he relates the conversions of two very different individuals, one a pagan polytheist from Ethiopia, and the other a deeply religious Jewish monotheist. Both needed, and both experienced, conversion. Luke’s detailed, slow-motion picture allows us to see the crucial stages in their spiritual re-births.

The first element in the polytheist’s conversion was the sheer attractiveness of Israel’s monotheistic faith. Israel’s God was the creator and upholder of the universe; paganism’s many gods were little more than personifications and deifications of the blind forces and processes of nature. Israel’s God was transcendent above all the matter and forces of the universe; and man, being made in his image, was likewise superior to them in significance. In paganism, mortal men were little more than the
slaves, or else the toys, of the gods—doomed to be discarded when the gods lost interest in them, or abandoned to their fate which even the gods could not resist. The Ethiopian had understandably tired of these absurdities; and just before the Christian evangelist Philip met him, he had been up to Jerusalem to seek and to worship God in the Jewish temple.

Now, turning from polytheism—or, for that matter, from atheism—to believe in the existence of the One True God, is obviously a necessary first step in conversion. But it is not the whole story; for by itself it leaves unanswered the all-important question: how can man approach God, and find a right and satisfactory personal relationship with him?

The next element, then, in the Ethiopian’s conversion was his personal search for God by reading the Bible. In Jerusalem, apparently, he had obtained a copy of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah, which eloquently spoke of God’s plan for the redemption, not only of Israel, but of all mankind. That redemption, so Isaiah predicted, would be achieved by a great Messianic Figure called the Servant of the Lord, whom God would send into the world. He would reign as universal king, put down evil, banish war, establish world-wide justice and peace, bring salvation to Israel and to the nations, and eventually restore the whole creation.

This hope, guaranteed as it was by the love, rationality, and power of the Creator, had nothing to match it in paganism. But, even more striking was the prediction that this Messianic Figure would himself suffer rejection, torture, and death as the means of achieving the promised redemption! What could it mean?

When Philip met him, the Ethiopian had reached the very passage in Isaiah that predicted Messiah’s innocent, non-retaliatory sufferings: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before its shearers, so he opened not his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice… his life was taken from the earth” (53:7-8). Philip was able to tell the Ethiopian not only that these prophecies referred to Jesus, but that they had been fulfilled by him, and that his resurrection from the dead had shown that Jesus, the Innocent Sufferer, was in fact the promised Messiah-King, Son of God, and Redeemer.

Millions have felt the power of this story of Jesus, the divine King who suffered innocently and without retaliation; who even prayed for those who crucified him. But what exactly does this mean for us, and for the world at large? Is it’s implication that, if only everyone in the world were to follow the example of Christ and accept without retaliation the suffering that comes upon them through their own sins and those of other people, then, by accepting this suffering, the whole world would be redeemed?

It is certainly true that once people become disciples of Christ, they are called on to follow Christ’s example and, in life’s various situations, to suffer without retaliation (1 Peter 2:21-24). But we must face the realities of this fallen world.

The 2000 years since the death and resurrection of Christ have shown unfortunately that it is an altogether unrealistic hope that evil, if not retaliated against, will, like a hurricane, blow itself out and become a spent force.

Nor, of course, can the mere non-retaliatory sufferings of the innocent in the present or the future redress the injustices of the past. Indeed, the Bible plainly says that only the Second Coming of Christ in power, to execute the judgments of God on this evil world and to establish his own universal kingdom, can do that. The reality of the situation is that, until men and women are converted, they will have neither the power nor the willingness to follow Christ’s example of suffering.

What, then, is the relation of his suffering to conversion? To find out, we must follow Philip’s exposition of the gospel all the way. Beginning with the verses that
spoke of the non-retaliatory sufferings of Christ (because that is the place that the 
Ethiopian had reached in his reading), Philip would certainly have gone on to 
expound the remaining verses of that prophecy. They spoke of those deeper 
substitutionary sufferings of Christ, by which individual men and women can be 
reconciled to their Creator. According to Isaiah, it was not to be by following Christ's 
example and by suffering ourselves, that we were to obtain forgiveness, peace with 
God, and eternal life. “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,” says 
the prophet—not upon us. It is by his wounds, not by our own, that we are healed.

We all like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all on 
him, not on us. God will make his soul a sacrifice for sin, said the prophet; and the 
metaphor he used, drawn as it was from ancient Israel’s symbolic sacrificial system, 
put the matter beyond doubt. When an ancient Israelite brought an innocent animal 
as his sin-offering, the animal died, not as an example of how the sinner might in turn 
suffer for his own sins and thus find forgiveness; it died as a substitute in the place of 
the sinner, so that the sinner should not himself have to suffer the penalty of sin and 
die.

The doctrine of reconciliation with God through the substitutionary sufferings of 
Christ has not always appealed to everyone as good news. It is difficult for our pride 
to accept that we are sinners in need of salvation. But if we can gain, or contribute 
to, our salvation by suffering for our own sins, and for the sins of others, it salvages 
least some of our pride.

Yet human pride and independence of God are the root of our trouble; no 
paradise can be achieved until they are eradicated. It is when we come to see and to 
accept that we are nothing but spiritual bankrupts, who can only be forgiven solely by 
God’s grace through the substitutionary sufferings of His Son, that the root of our 
pride is cut, and our relationship with God is transformed. So it was with the 
Ethiopian who on these terms was converted, had himself baptized, and went on his 
way rejoicing.

In that very same chapter of Isaiah that led to the Ethiopian’s conversion, the 
prophet had predicted that by his knowledge God’s righteous Servant the Messiah 
would justify many (53:11); and the second case of individual conversion which Luke 
here records is that of Saul of Tarsus, the man who later, as the Apostle Paul, wrote 
so extensively on the fundamental Christian doctrine of justification by faith. He 
learned the meaning of justification and its necessity, not only from the Bible but from 
his own personal experience.

All his life he had been a strict monotheist and a deeply religious man, who had 
made an honest (and, as he felt, successful) attempt to keep God’s moral and 
religious law. Indeed, it was his zeal for God that made him persecute the Christians 
for what he considered their blasphemous claim that Jesus was equal with God! But 
when the risen Lord appeared to him on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, it 
produced three radical revolutions in his thought and behaviour.

First, it exposed the fact that in spite of his strict monotheism—he had always 
believed in the existence of One True God—in the only sense that really mattered, 
he was not a believer in God at all, and never had been! The Jesus whom he had 
been persecuting, he now knew to be God Incarnate; thus his own actions had 
demonstrated him to be not only an unbeliever, but an enemy of God.

Secondly, it exposed the fact that all his effort to keep God’s law was worthless. 
It had ended in his murder of God’s Son! He was as lost as any pagan polytheist. He 
now saw with blinding clarity that if ever he was going to be justified and accepted by 
God, it would have to be solely on the grounds of faith; where faith meant, as he later
expressed it, “being justified freely by God’s grace, man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (see Romans 3:24–4:5).

Thirdly, his conversion had a momentous outcome. Before his conversion, when he believed that salvation depended on his merit, he was a self-centred, persecuting bigot, who cared nothing for the salvation of the world outside Judaism. But when he discovered that salvation is not by merit but by faith, he never persecuted anyone again. On the contrary, he became the greatest of all the early Christian missionaries. It is no exaggeration to say that through his oral and written exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith multi-millions throughout the whole world, up to the present day, have found spiritual freedom and peace with God.