

What is Conversion?

Christian conversion is the turn *from* serving and following idols and self and *to* serving and following the Lord Jesus Christ that results in new birth into the kingdom of God and doing good works.

Paul's letter to the Church at Thessalonica talks about their conversion:

¹ Thessalonians 1:9 For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Theologian Dr. Brad Kallenberg thinks that Christian conversion can be thought of as changing one's social identity, acquiring a new conceptual language, and as having a paradigm shift. (*Live To Tell*, Brazos)

1. Conversion as a change of one's social identity: The Gospel message is not just a set of propositions but a self-involving, life-changing story in which we find ourselves caught up and living out a new social identity. Paul describes this in Romans as being transferred from a life "in Adam" to a life "in Christ," or we might say, being transferred from the Adam-solidarity into the Christ-solidarity. Both social identities carry with them a view of reality and a lifestyle for how to live.
2. Conversion as the acquisition of a new conceptual language: The Gospel offers new language for understanding the new life of the social identity. The Gospel shapes the language and experience of the new Community. Fluency in this new language is best learned and adopted in the Christian community's life and in its stories.
3. Conversion is a paradigm shift: Kallenberg writes: "If we understand a paradigm as the defining set of beliefs embodied in the life of a community, then a paradigm shift involves for the individual an exchange of allegiance from an old community to a new one." (42) The new community and individuals in the new community help pre-Christians and new Christians understand the new view of reality from within the community. At some point, the Bible ceases to be an object one views and instead becomes the lens itself through which one sees. That is when there is a shift in paradigms (43)

New Life is what happens when people believe in Jesus Christ and the God who sent him into the world to redeem it. Those people have their sins forgiven. They have come home to God. They have entered the Kingdom of God. All this is from God.

We cannot manipulate a person into the kingdom of God. There are no magic words to say; we must not be superstitious about conversion. God knows the heart of the person being evangelized for God is the one who is at work to bring people into the Kingdom.

But we can work to create conditions where our non-Christian friends can hear and see and taste the story of what God has done in Christ and in us. We have a story to tell and others can see how the Christian life works, on the ground, in action, in the lives of you and your Christian fellowship.

Jesus's Statement of the need for Conversion

John 3:3 Jesus answered him [Nicodemus], “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit....”

This is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about the Return from Exile. Hear from Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 36:25 I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. ²⁸Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

What Jesus was saying to Nicodemus was that right under his nose the prophecies of God coming to redeem his people and give them his Spirit were coming true. The True Return from Exile was coming in Messiah Jesus himself. The kingdom of God was arriving with King Jesus. Entering the Kingdom of God requires conversion.

John's Comments on Believing

This first passage is from John’s prologue, meaning it’s a summary of what he will unpack in his Gospel account. All of John’s Gospel is about who is Jesus and what it means to believe in him and so have eternal life (life of the Age to Come). The second passage is near the end of his Gospel. His Gospel is evangelistic and aims for believe in the Jesus John has spent so much time telling us about.

John 1:10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

John 2:23 When he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed [trusted] in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴But Jesus on his part would not entrust [same word as underlined word in v 23] himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

John 20:26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

In John's Gospel there is a "continuum of belief": At one end you have Nathanael who believes maybe too quickly, and on the other end you have Thomas whom Jesus indicates should have believed sooner.

Nathanael—

John 1:47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Thomas—

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What you have between these two ends of this continuum of belief are people responding to Jesus in all kinds of belief. There is, of course, also a continuum of unbelief.

Your non-Christian friends will fall one or other of these two continuums. Your job will be to help them come to believe in King Jesus.

Conversion is needed. Belief is required.