

The Process of Conversion

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When do you think Saul of Tarsus was converted? At what point was he born again?

Was it when he saw and heard Jesus? Or when he fell to the ground? Or when he asked “Who are you Lord?” Or when Jesus answered him? Or when Ananias laid hands on him? Or when the scales fell off his eyes? Or when he was baptised? Or when he received the Holy Spirit? We can’t be sure.

In every case, conversion is a complex thing. It has many facets – psychological and sociological – in addition to the religious or spiritual. It may take a short or a long time.

The meaning of conversion

In Christian conversion, of course, we believe that the Holy Spirit is at work, convincing the mind of truth and convicting the conscience of sin and forgiveness. But there are also human forces at play. There are *psychological* reasons why people change their opinions, their attitudes and commitments. There are *sociological* reasons why people alter their behaviour, their manner of speech and relationships. There are *many forms of conversion*, both permanent and temporary, and *many processes leading to conversion*.

The word “conversion” is disliked in certain places. Indeed, conversion to Christianity may arouse bitter religious and political feelings among people of different beliefs. In normal conversation we may prefer another term, such as “rebirth” or “believing” or “coming to faith”. But *conversion is a biblical concept*, as we shall see. And the word is used in *wider academic circles*, not just by theologians but by sociologists and psychologists too.

Every religion or political system will claim to have converts. People of all types may, and often do, alter or adapt their ideals, morals, behaviour, convictions and priorities. Many have shifted from one belief-system to another. Some will even practise two or more at the same time. A man, for example, may act as a Muslim in the mosque and a sorcerer on his farm. A woman may talk like a modern lady at work and a traditional lady at home.

In order to see how the process of conversion works we need to have some understanding of *human nature* and *human relationships*. We must know how, and why, men and women change their views and their

behaviour. With these insights we should be better equipped to help them become fully committed to Christ, firmly established in their faith and able to share it with others. We will know how to avoid the mistakes that may hinder them from attaining an assured faith or cause them to turn back and lose it.

A wise evangelist will be aware of what human beings are like. In addition to studying scripture, he will study people.

The sociology of conversion

A risky move

Sociology is the study of how people interact and relate to one another. In church and mission we are constantly interacting and relating to other people, so the more we understand about this the better.

Conversion is not normal behaviour. It is not an everyday part of life. In fact every culture is resistant to conversion. Stability in a community or a nation is maintained by a set of common beliefs and expectations. The people in general will assume that there are certain right and wrong methods and times and priorities and ways of behaving. Children are brought up to recognise and follow this code of acceptable behaviour. It reduces fear of the unknown and assures each individual that he or she is approved and valued.

It is very difficult for an individual to step out of this secure consensus – to question the accepted norms, to adopt alternatives. Few individuals will have sufficient self-confidence (or desperation) to risk breaking out of the culture they were born into. If you attempt this, at first people will laugh at you, then they will ignore you, and before long they may despise or even hate you.

As Christians we are convinced that the gospel changes people for the better, and we might therefore assume that the good news will be willingly accepted everywhere. It is important to understand why this does not happen. Despite the honesty, kindness, patience and peacefulness of Christian people, we are often considered dangerous. This happens at a personal level and also at a tribal or national level. The consequence may be mockery, harsh words, threats and eventually physical force and violence. Let us consider why.

1. When a person is converted to Christ, he or she adopts different beliefs, priorities, attitudes and friends. This will usually cause the traditional community to feel quite uncomfortable. It will seem that you are rejecting their customs and culture, and indeed that you are rejecting them personally along with the ancestors of your people. It appears that

you no longer respect their wisdom or experience or ask their advice. This may seem a shameful humiliation. They will be worried that if others do as you have done, the old beliefs and the old ways may be lost forever. And this can indeed happen. At any time, *the gospel is a genuine threat to every other belief-system.*

2. When a single individual resolves to think and act for himself, he can be laughed at, insulted and excluded, but when a large number opt out of a cultural consensus, the stability of the whole community, tribe or even nation is threatened. Some governments recognise this quite openly and therefore seek to suppress minority religions such as Christianity. The reason is usually not because they find any fault in the Christians but because fanatics promoting other religions become angry whenever Christians increase in number or influence. The fanatics may threaten or commit terrorist acts against churches or against government officials, and so put pressure on the government to suppress Christianity. It is, of course, easier for the government to suppress Christians than to suppress terrorists. The Christians do not act dangerously but their presence may cause others to act dangerously. In these circumstances, *the gospel is a genuine danger to public order.*

In view of the social pressure against conversion in every culture, it is surprising that anyone ever abandons traditional beliefs and practices in order to follow Christ. The fact that they do so, and then persevere despite the difficulties, shows how attractive the gospel must be to many people. This should certainly encourage us in our gospel outreach.

A deliberate choice

Research shows that most people who convert to a new belief-system were *not strongly committed to their previous belief-system.* They had not invested a lot in it, so they have relatively little to lose by abandoning it. In general they were lukewarm or even somewhat disengaged. This means that we will be wise to focus our gospel outreach not on people strongly committed to another belief-system but *on those who are merely nominal adherents.*

In general, people are not seeking a new religion. They are usually content with what they have and making the best of life as it comes to them. In most cases it is not a new teaching or a new idea that interests them but *the prospect of a new circle of friends,* or other social contacts, who may bring some significant benefit. In order to develop these new relationships they are willing to learn a new way of thinking and behaving. A wise evangelist will not only proclaim a message but also develop a wide

network of friendships. He will introduce his potential converts to believers who will welcome them as friends. Once a newcomer is committed to *friendship with the network of believers,* he or she will be motivated to acquire the information and behaviour patterns that bring full acceptance as a functioning member of the network. It is at this point that he or she may finally understand the gospel and become truly committed to Christ.¹

Sociology and scripture

These sociological insights do not in any way conflict with what we learn from scripture. But they do enable us to understand people better and to engage more effectively in the work of mission. Sociological experience will deepen our understanding of mass movements, people-groups, homogeneous units, culture conflict, contextualization, the stages of pioneer outreach and many other aspects of mission, enabling us to foresee what is likely to happen in any particular circumstance and plan accordingly.²

The theology of conversion

It is sometimes said that entire tribes or nations have converted to Islam or Communism or some other belief-system, but as Bible-believing Christians we can never make such a claim. *Conversion to Christ is a personal matter* for each individual. We must each be born again through personal faith in Christ. Jesus said, “If anyone has ears to hear... If anyone would come after me... If anyone keeps my word...” The offer of salvation is for each man or woman, to be accepted or refused. In “the book of life” are written the names of believers, not of nations or families or churches. This makes Christianity *far more individualistic* than most other systems of religion or belief.

In a mass movement, there may be hundreds or even thousands of people genuinely born again. But among the mass of people who are outwardly impressed, a large number may be inwardly unchanged. Some may be emotionally moved without actually understanding much; some may be sincere at first and later fall away; a few may be hypocrites acting a part for reasons of their own. (See Lk 8:4-15.) There is *no such thing as a group conversion to Christ* – only the conversion of individuals within the group.

This is a theological principle that holds true in all circumstances.

¹ For an introduction to the sociology of religion, see Rodney Stark and Roger Finke: *Acts of Faith – explaining the human side of religion* (Univ. California Press, 2000), chapters 5 and 9.

² For a sociological perspective on the remarkable success of the early churches, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (HarperCollins, 1997).

A change of belief

In the New Testament there are two important Greek words for conversion. The first is *metanoia*, meaning a change of mind or “second thoughts”. It describes how a person will abandon one set of beliefs and adopt another, inspired by new principles, ideals and convictions.

John the Baptist and Jesus both began their ministries with this word: “Repent [*metanoete*], for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2; 4:17). They were asking people to think carefully. The time had come to understand something new, to change their belief-system and their worldview. In the Bible *metanoia* is often translated “repentance”, but it really means a change of ideas and attitudes. It means a change of **beliefs**.

A change of behaviour

The second word is *epistrōphē*, meaning “a turning from one thing to another”. It indicates a change of behaviour – a new lifestyle, new activities and new social networks. So we read about “the conversion of the Gentiles” (Acts 15:3). The related verb *epistrōphō* is used in 1 Thess 1:9: “you turned to God from idols.” James tells us: “Whoever brings back (*epistrepsas*) a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (Ja 5:20). In the Bible *epistrōphē* is rendered “conversion” – a new lifestyle, new activities and social networks. It means a change of **behaviour**.

Complete conversion

In Acts 3:19 these two basic words (*metanoia* and *epistrōphē*) are used together when Peter says, “Repent therefore, and turn, that your sins may be blotted out.” This means a change of both belief and behaviour.

These two Greek words *metanoia* and *epistrōphē* focus on human beings. They show how *we* change what we think and do, how *we* turn from one way of life to another way of life. But there are other words in the New Testament that focus on the work of *the Lord God* in conversion.

For example, in Col 1:13-14 we read, “He has *delivered* us from the domain of darkness and *transferred* us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have *redemption*, the *remission of sins*.” This describes the conversion of people in terms of what God has done for them. Other verses focus on the marvel of rebirth, justification, liberation, reconciliation, purification and re-creation. These all speak of what *the Lord God* does in the process of conversion.

We should never forget that every conversion is a wonderful, gracious, loving act of God. There was a day when the Creator of the universe accepted me in Christ, forgave my sins, wrote my name in the book of life

and placed his Spirit of holiness in me. These are very wonderful things that I could never do for myself.

It is also important to remember that conversion is not our goal. It is merely the *start* of a process. As soon as I am born as a spiritual baby, I begin to grow. So we read, “He who has begun a good work in you *will carry it on to completion* until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6).

These are important theological principles to bear in mind as we study the process of conversion to Christ.³

The psychology of conversion

Research and experience show that people are not normally attracted by a new religious doctrine or belief but by the character, lifestyle and community *of the people who believe and follow it*.

In most cases, when a person adopts a new belief-system, the reason is not because they think it is true but *because they can see it is beneficial*. They have observed some significant advantage in the new way that justifies cutting their ties with the past. The practical possibilities it offers are sufficiently appealing that they are willing to loosen, and perhaps lose, their old friendships and previous social networks.

Knowing this, an evangelist will want to introduce newcomers *to the network of believers* as soon as possible and encourage the believers to share their *personal testimonies*. And he will *speak clearly about the benefits* that come through faith in Christ. There are wonderful things we receive when we are born again:

Peace with God every moment of the day	Rom 5:1-2
Eternal life in the age to come	Jn 5:24
Protection from the power of evil	1 Jn 5:18-19; Eph 6:11-18
A purposeful plan for my life	Eph 2:10; Rom 8:28
Provision for all my needs	Matt 6:31-33; Phil 4:19
Faithful friends to help me	Heb 13:7; 10:24-25
The word of God to guide me	2 Tim 3:16-17
The Holy Spirit to transform me	Gal 5:22-23; 4:19

The stages leading to full conversion

There are usually five stages leading to full conversion. Consider them carefully:

1. discovery – beginning to understand the basic facts and desiring to hear more.

³ On the theology of conversion, see Dean S Gilliland, *Pauline Theology and Mission Practice* (Baker, 1983), Chapter 4.

2. **deliberation** (or discussion) – weighing up the benefits of accepting or rejecting.
3. **decision** – recognising that the gospel is helpful and deciding to trust in Christ.
4. **doubt** (or distraction) – facing uncertainties, tensions, temptations and persecutions.
5. **discipleship** (or devotion) – full commitment to Christ and to others who follow Christ.

In practice, many missionaries focus on **3. decision**. They urge a quick choice... and then feel disappointed when their convert falls away. But a skilful evangelist will help people to progress through each of these five stages to full conversion.

Think of Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8). If we were in Philip's shoes, many of us might quickly tell the Ethiopian, "You are a sinner. Jesus died for you. Believe in him. Now you are saved." But Philip was concerned to make sure this man *understood*. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Understanding must come before a genuine decision. A person needs to know what he is committing himself to. A good decision will be an informed decision, based on adequate knowledge. That is why teaching is so important (Matt 4:23; Acts 4:2; 28:31). On the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd "Let this be known to you." He then gave them a report of recent events and quoted many scriptures. It was this information that led his hearers to ask, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

Dealing with people in this way shows proper respect for their intelligence and judgment, avoiding the impression that we are rudely and arrogantly trying to impose our own views on them (1 Pet 3:15).

First of all then, we should help people with...

1. discovery.

Some people will be thrilled immediately to hear that God loves them and wants to guide and help them. They will ask questions and want to find out more.

But knowing that humans are often lazy and reluctant to consider anything new, we may have to awaken their interest, stimulate their spiritual appetite, and show them there is something of great value to gain. This can be done with an interesting story or a remarkable testimony, or a genuinely loving and joyful attitude. Our desire is for them to discover what we have discovered.

Once their interest is awakened and they have some basic information, then follows...

2. deliberation (or discussion).

A person who is learning about Christ may see positive advantages in accepting the gospel. Some benefits will be spiritual (protection from occult powers, forgiveness of past sins, peace with God, eternal life etc.). Some may be emotional (new friendships, possibilities for marriage etc.). Some may be material (new opportunities for work, travel, education, personal development etc.).

But this person may also have prejudices and hindrances – private issues, bad habits or besetting sins, religious questions or objections, opposition from friends and family etc.

He or she will need to weigh up the options and count the cost. Although following Christ will be wonderful, it may also be difficult or even dangerous. A person will need good reasons to believe and to continue in the faith.

Deliberation and discussion may take some time before they reach the point of...

3. decision.

To repent and believe marks a definite break with the past and the start of a new life. We may hesitate to embarrass a person by insisting on a definite choice to accept or reject the gospel. They may prefer to keep their options open. Like Elijah we may have to say, "How long will you go hopping between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Ki 18:21).

We may have to warn about the danger of failing to respond: "With many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation'" (Acts 2:40).

After making a firm decision to follow Christ, a convert may then be troubled by...

4. doubt (or distraction).

Almost immediately, or after some time, the new believer is likely to face temptation. They may hear their faith mocked, or even suffer severe persecution. It is easy to become unsettled at this point, wondering if they made the right choice, or whether they should return to their old ways.

They may require much personal kindness, spiritual counsel, biblical teaching and material help (work, accommodation, legal advice etc.) from the Christian community.

If the difficulties they face are dealt with well, they should emerge from the experience stronger in spirit, more convinced of the truth and more knowledgeable in the scriptures.

After overcoming these initial issues of doubt, distraction and opposition, the final stage to full conversion is...

5. discipleship (or devotion).

By this time, the convert has acquired the information, answered the objections, faced the difficulties, counted the cost, made a firm decision, and overcome doubts and difficulties.

In addition, they have weighed up their former lifestyle and belief-system, firmly rejected whatever may be incompatible with the gospel, and adopted a genuinely Christian way of life. They have closer friendships with believers than with their previous social and religious community.

By this stage we consider such people fully converted. We have real confidence in them.

Helping people towards full conversion

Our desire as missionaries and evangelists will be to help each person attain full conversion. They are likely to need encouragement at every stage. For this reason, they should be welcomed as soon as possible into the company of Christian friends who will accept and support them. This will give them opportunities to confess with the lips what is happening in the heart (Rom 10:10).

Whenever someone joins a social group they will expect to do what the people in that group are doing. This is true whether you join a sports club or a music class, a youth club or a library etc. People expect this with a church or youth fellowship or Christian project too. They will want to be part of something worthwhile and to participate in what is being done. We must help them find opportunities *to do the good things that Christ is teaching them to do...* not merely as a listener or learner but as an active and useful disciple following the example of the Master (Lk 3:8; Jn 15:14). If there are church activities, holistic ministries or outreach initiatives, encourage them to take part.

An interested or responsive person should not be left on their own if they seem to have doubts at any stage or fall into error or sin. This is the time when they most need friendship, compassion and prayer, so they may overcome their difficulties and progress towards full conversion.⁴

We will now consider which of these five stages is the best time to *baptise* someone coming to faith in Christ.

⁴ On the psychology of conversion, see Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Yale University Press, 1993).

The significance of baptism in conversion

Baptism means different things in different churches. In some it is the custom to baptise babies. In others it is a social convention for teenagers. In certain places it is a requirement for office (teachers, deacons etc.) or for marriage. In some contexts, Hindu or Muslim converts may not be accepted as genuine believers until they have been baptised.

According to the custom of the church, baptism may represent some or all of the following:

- the convert's personal faith and commitment
- a public declaration of conversion to Christ
- God's acceptance of the convert
- the end of the old life and the start of the new life
- washing away sins
- the convert's desire to belong to the Christian community
- the Christian community's acceptance of the convert

The biblical meaning of baptism

In baptism a believer shows his or her commitment to Christ in two ways:

• identifying with the death and resurrection of Christ.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been *baptized into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-4; also Col 2:12).

• identifying with all the followers of Christ.

"For in one Spirit we were all *baptized into one body* – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13).

We have looked at five stages leading to full conversion. **At which stage do you think we should we baptise a person?**

At stage 1. as a commitment to discover more?

At stage 2. as a resolve to overcome personal hindrances through deliberation or discussion?

At stage 3. as a declaration of trust in Christ to save?

At stage 4. as a positive way to overcome doubt or distraction?

At stage 5. as an affirmation of fully committed discipleship and devotion?

At which stage were the following New Testament people baptised?

the Jews in Jerusalem

Acts 2:38, 41

the Samaritans	Acts 8:12
the Ethiopian official	Acts 8:36-38
Saul of Tarsus	Acts 9:18; 22:16
Cornelius and his household	Acts 10:47-48
Lydia	Acts 16:14-15
the Philippian jailer	Acts 16:33

Biblical perspectives on conversion

Why do people change from one belief-system to another? Several influences contribute to most conversions. We can see all these at work in the New Testament, as we do in the world today.

1. Evidence.

A person may become aware of undeniable facts or acquire convincing evidence. Perhaps a prayer is remarkably answered, or something happens at a crucial moment which shows them God is at work. Or they may hear a sermon or a testimony, or read a verse from the Bible that makes sense and persuades them. They may see scientific evidence of the Creator in creation or historical evidence that Christ died and rose again. They may be impressed by a believer who lives a beautiful life. All these things point to the truth of the gospel and convince a person on the basis of clear positive evidence.

There are times when evidence may also work negatively. A person may discover *awkward facts* about their old belief-system. They may see clear proof that the old way is wrong, and so become open to a new way:

- Muslims may become disillusioned with violent Islam.
- Rural people may begin to despise traditional witchcraft.
- Educated people may become irritated with the religion of corrupt administrators.

At the same time they may discover *attractive facts* about a new belief-system, awakening a desire to investigate and accept it:

- Muslims may be impressed by the character of Christians they know.
- Rural people may see that Christians start excellent clinics and schools.
- Educated people may value the integrity and wisdom of Christian leaders.

In the New Testament we see how people were drawn to Christ in these two ways – by awkward facts and attractive facts.

- The Jews were troubled by the humiliation of their nation, the violence of their king, the corruption in their Temple. They feared their own political leaders (Jn 7:13) and their Roman overlords (Jn 11:48). They

resented the religious bullying of the Pharisees in their synagogues (Matt 3:7; 23:4; Jn 12:42). These were *awkward facts* that undermined their trust in the old belief-system.

- At the same time, there were *attractive facts* that drew them strongly to Jesus – his inspired teaching, his wonderful miracles, his compassionate character. When his apostles spoke of the empty tomb and the prophecies fulfilled, many people were persuaded by definite evidence and convincing proofs (Jn 12:17-19; Acts 13:30-33; 17:2-4).

In New Testament times men and women believed because they had good reason to believe. To some of them the evidence came *suddenly and unexpectedly* – the shepherds at Bethlehem, the woman of Samaria, the centurion beside the cross, the crowd at Pentecost, the cripple at the Temple gate, the Ethiopian, the Philippian jailer and Lydia.

Others were *deliberately seeking to know the truth* – Nicodemus, the Greeks who approached Andrew, Cornelius and his household, the governor Sergius Paulus.

For a small number it involved careful research and *a long persevering quest* – such as the Magi from the East.

So we see that an awareness of facts, both positive and negative, may lead an individual to seek a change – to abandon the old ways and commit him- or herself to Christ. We would call this **an evidential conversion**.

2. Mystical experience.

Some people are led towards conversion by a spiritual experience – a dream, a vision, an angel or revelation. This is usually *an unexpected event*. We cannot prepare or plan for a genuine mystical experience of God. It is not a strategy we can initiate or practise or manage.

An experience of this sort comes to *a prepared person*. It supplements and reinforces a previous seeking for facts or an earlier discovery of evidence. A genuine experience of God comes to those who are longing for the truth, or for God himself, not to those who are seeking exciting or unusual experiences.

Then it directs the person *to seek further information* and shows them where to go for it. A dream, a vision, an angel or revelation will lead a person to seek help from God's people. Cornelius gave frequently to the poor and was busy with his prayers when suddenly he had a vision. The vision was not sufficient on its own – it led him to send for Peter (Acts 10:1-3). Saul of Tarsus was trying sincerely but ignorantly to serve God when, on the Damascus Road, he saw a vision. The vision led him to a man,

Ananias, who explained its meaning and told him what to do next (Acts 22:3-16).

If a vision or other spiritual experience seems to be the major turning point in a person's life, we might call it a **mystical conversion**.

3. *Social needs.*

People have a natural desire for friendship, affection and affirmation. We all like to be part of a *group offering acceptance and love*. Social needs may be very significant in conversion, especially for marginal individuals who are alienated from their traditional community and culture.

When Christians are engaged in activities that seem exciting and worthwhile, the people around them *will not want to miss out* on the good things that are happening. This is natural, and it draws men, women and children to Christian fellowship and to faith in Christ. The motivation may be selfish (to gain personal benefit), or it may be altruistic (to help advance a noble or idealistic cause). In many cases it is both.

To enter a new social circle is often a *personal choice*. But sometimes a *whole group* may seek new social connections. A church, for example, may leave a syncretistic denomination to join a genuinely evangelical denomination. A village may switch from a secular development agency to one that proclaims the gospel. The underlying desire is for relationship with people whose character, work or worldview are admired.

The decision to join a new social network may often be calm and rational. But in some cases it can be *highly emotional*, as we see in certain mass movements. If people around us are stirred up emotionally, it affects us emotionally too.

Social motives for conversion are not easy to identify in the New Testament. A desire to share in the communal life of Jesus and his disciples may be seen in the man set free from a legion of demons (Mk 5:18), and in Mary Magdalene and several other women (Lk 8:2-3). A desire to join the church may be observed in Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:26). Paul's own followers may have been attracted by his character as much as his teaching, and indeed by the fellowship they would enjoy together as disciples (1 Thess 1:6).

The Old Testament shows us Hobab who went to assist the Israelites (Num 10:29-32), Rahab who saw the power of God with them (Josh 2), the Gibeonites who sought acceptance with them (Josh 9), and Ruth who loved her mother-in-law.

If a human relationship is the first or major component of a conversion, it would be identified as a **social conversion**.

4. *Ambition.*

In the world today there are countless thousands of people who lack the necessities and comforts of life. For such people, turning to Christianity may be seen as a way of escape from poverty and disease – a means to achieve some kind of stability or security for an individual, family or tribe.

Many came to Jesus asking for his help. Theirs was a desire for basic essentials (Matt 15:25; Mk 9:22). No one should be blamed for such an ambition. But some people may also think Christianity is a way to become successful (blessed) and rich (prosperous), “imagining that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Tim 6:5). Some, like Simon the sorcerer, may aspire to celebrity status (Acts 8:13 and 18-19).

A change of religion for the sake of advancement in wealth or status may be called an **ambitious conversion**. But ambition, on its own, does not normally result in a stable and permanent commitment to Christ.

5. *Coercion.*

History records many cases of religious conversion as a result of physical or psychological pressure. This may affect individuals, groups or even nations.

Force was effective, for example, in the Islamic conquest and conversion of North Africa (violent attack, occupation, mutilation and discriminatory taxation). It was also effective in the Catholic conquest of Latin America. But **violent coercion** is obviously not an option for gospel mission.

Almost as bad is **legal coercion**, because its enforcement requires the threat and if necessary the use of force. There have been times and places when the populace of a “Christian” nation were compelled by law to attend the religious services of the national church and were severely punished for failing to do so. (John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was imprisoned for twelve years for this reason.) Many people in such circumstances become nominal church-goers and hypocrites in order to avoid trouble.

A measure of **physical coercion** may compel children and youth to attend Sunday school or religious classes. As a consequence, many of them may positively understand and accept the gospel, but some may also be hardened against it, acquiring a good knowledge of scripture without any faith in Christ. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me”... but he did not compel them.

Preaching the gospel, however, will always involve a measure of **psychological coercion**.

- Jesus said, “Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28).

- John the Baptist warned of the wrath to come (Matt 3:7).
- Paul also warned of the wrath to come (1 Thess 1:10).
- Peter advised the people of Jerusalem, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40). When he showed them their guilt and danger, they were cut to the heart and asked, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Warning of danger may lead to such questions. It is then our privilege to help our hearers find safety in Christ.

A gospel preacher may feel anxious and upset about the lost condition of the people around him. Paul said, “for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears” (Acts 20:31). Our genuine emotion may move the hearts and minds of our hearers. But this should never become a mere performance attempting to manipulate their feelings. If a conversion is merely an emotional response to psychological coercion, it is not likely to last very long.

A **coercive conversion** will always be unstable, because it was not a free and willing choice.

Conclusion: It is clear that a sound and genuine conversion must include a number of these elements. If it comprises only one of them, it is unlikely to be profound or permanent.

Consolidating conversion

Conversion to Christianity, or any other belief-system, may be either short-term or long-term. We must understand how a partial conversion to Christ may become complete, how an initial conversion may become permanent, and how a hesitant conversion may become assured. We must help people to become completely and fully converted.

In the New Testament we see various incomplete and inadequate conversions, and some genuine permanent conversions:

1. *Confused and ignorant conversion*

In this case the person misunderstands the essence of Christianity, thinking it is one thing when it is really something else. He or she is committed to the new way but knows little about it. This may happen especially when the conversion is essentially mystical or ambitious.

The case of Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24). When he heard Philip proclaim the gospel, “Simon himself believed.” Then he was *baptised*. But his special interest was in magic, which had previously brought him success and fame: “Seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.” When Peter and John laid their hands on Simon and others they

received the Holy Spirit. But then Simon offered the apostles money, saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

Simon was a baptised believer with an *ambitious* conversion. But his desire for status and power was his downfall. Peter said, “May your silver perish with you... You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours.” Simon was still evidently sincere for he replied, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.” Simon’s conversion was **confused and ignorant**. After Peter’s initial rebuke, his need was for teaching and wise pastoral advice. Responding to this, he might overcome his problem and become a sound and intelligent convert.

2. *Superficial and temporary conversion*

This occurs when a person thinks there may be definite advantages in adopting the new beliefs and practices but still wants to keep his or her options open in case there is actually no great benefit. They may think, “It’s worth a try. Let’s see what happens.” But they retain a measure of loyalty towards previous beliefs and traditions, and may continue to do some things they always did. There is no clean break with the past.

The case of the disillusioned disciples (John 6:26-66). Early in Jesus’s ministry, many people were following him because they had seen and heard about the feeding of the five thousand. They were genuinely interested in what he could do, but he warned them, “You are seeking me... because you ate your fill of the loaves.” And he advised, “Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life... I am the bread of life. If anyone eats of this bread he will live for ever.” This started an argument among his hearers. Some said, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” A number were upset, saying “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” Then “after this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.” Their conversion came to a sudden end.

They had marvelled at the miracles but could not grasp the teaching. Influenced by unbelievers, they turned away. Their conversion had been **superficial and temporary**. At that point they needed just what Jesus gave them – the challenge to declare their belief or unbelief. Their continued presence would not benefit them and might harm others.

3. *Profound and permanent conversion*

We might wish that all people were like this. They have seen good reason to follow Christ. In most cases they were already disillusioned with the old ways and had a strong desire for change. Having considered and rejected all other options, they have committed themselves wholeheartedly to him.

They may have accepted the gospel very quickly, thinking, “This is exactly what I’ve been looking for!” Or they may have weighed it up for a long time, saying, “I’ve tried everything else and this is now my only hope!” Having made their decision, they have little or no desire to return to their former state.

The case of the eleven apostles (John 6:67-68). We have seen that “many disciples” left Jesus. But then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked them, “Do you also want to go away?” Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” For Peter, the change from the old way to the new was well understood. He and the others had rejected the Judaism of the scribes, Pharisees and Herodians. They had enough evidence to believe in Jesus and were committed to him and to the new community of his followers. Despite personal weakness and failure (when they forsook him and fled), their conversion is shown to be **profound and permanent**. (Judas, of course, had other ideas and we will consider him in due course.)

4. *Temporary conversion becoming permanent*

In this case, a person has become interested in the new way and has started to learn more about it. He or she enjoys friendly contact with the new “faith community” and may start to act as a believer whilst still inwardly uncertain of many things. Through positive relationships, commitment is deepened. By gaining more evidence and confidence, belief becomes increasingly firm, leading to a complete and permanent conversion.

The case of the Samaritan villagers (John 4:42).

The Samaritan woman told her people what Jesus had said to her, and they were interested to know more. For two days they then heard what Jesus himself taught them, and afterwards said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.”

Another example is Nicodemus, who heard enough to interest him and went to discover more, which led him to become a secret believer supporting Jesus against the Sanhedrin. Likewise, the Ethiopian official

was committed to what he knew, uncertain of its meaning, humble enough to learn from Philip and then happy to accept what he said.

In each case, the new convert was teachable and responsive. They liked what they heard and wanted to hear more. This led gradually to intelligent faith and full commitment. In this way **temporary conversion became permanent**.

5. *Permanent conversion becoming temporary*

Here we see how a convert was running well but then stumbled (Gal 5:7). This may happen when belief is shaken in some way – through conflicting evidence, unhappy experience, or compromise through personal temptation and sin. It may be due to the attraction of other options, or to a cooling of relations with the new faith community on account of physical distance, lack of contact, unfulfilled expectations, or conflict, dishonesty or untruthfulness among the believers etc.

The case of Demas.

Demas was one of the most promising young missionaries in Paul’s team. When first mentioned as a fellow-worker, his name is placed before Luke (Philem 23-24). In Paul’s next letter, Luke is “beloved” but the name of Demas is added without commendation (Col 4:14). In his final letter, Paul tells us “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (2 Tim 4:10). Demas had been a genuine believer and a missionary but lost his commitment and perhaps some element of his faith.

In addition to this sad case, we may also think of Judas. He was chosen as a man with the potential to become an apostle like the others. Beginning to steal secretly from the money bag, he lost far more than he gained.

These men who had seemed totally committed to the cause of Christ did not continue with him. In their case, **permanent conversion became temporary**.

Genuine and permanent conversion

As we are called to make disciples, we must do all we can to ensure that men and women are genuinely and permanently converted to Christ and committed to following him.

1. Teach all the basic truths of the faith. Answer all the essential questions and objections. Resolve all the intellectual issues as far as

possible. Only then will your convert have real and lasting assurance that he or she is on the right path.

2. **Make sure they read or hear the word of God each day.** Every new believer starts as a spiritual baby and needs to grow in understanding, wisdom and character. Spiritual food is essential to spiritual life, as physical food is to physical life. It must be taken regularly every day.
3. **Give much brotherly love.** Introduce your convert to loving Christian friends so he or she will begin to enjoy fellowship and friendship with people who set a good example, providing emotional and intellectual support.
4. **Find some useful task for each new believer to do** as soon as possible. Most of them will want to be useful from the start, and this is both natural and healthy. Do not give them the idea that they must go to church in order to receive something. If they go to church, it should be in order to help others – not to be served but to serve. Many converts remain weak because their church does not give them anything useful to do.
5. **Deal with any bad influences or deeply rooted sins.** Encourage your disciple to tell you honestly about any difficulties he or she may be facing, and treat that information as confidential. Old relationships (with drug dealers, witches, fortune-tellers, false teachers etc.) may need to be ended. Old habits will need to be broken and new habits formed.
Through experience the new believer will learn to draw spiritual strength from the Holy Spirit, gradually becoming mature in Christ. Do not expect perfection immediately, but deal with each question or difficulty as it comes. Resolving one problem will increase confidence for overcoming the next.
6. **Help them to be guided by inner conviction,** not by external rules. Encourage in your disciple a desire to please Christ and be worthy of his trust. Show how “we make it our aim to please him” (2 Cor 5:9) and how “we serve in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of the written code” (Rom 7:6).
Encourage new believers to work out for themselves what they should do: “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5). Help them not to criticise or undermine the opinion or action or reputation of others (Rom 14:13).
7. **Be sensitive to any sign of falling away.** This may reveal itself in restlessness, disrespect, lack of interest, compromised behaviour, absence

from fellowship (Heb 3:12). It may start almost immediately after conversion, or many weeks, months or years later.

Remember that the shepherd will leave the ninety-nine in the fold and go in search of the one who strays. Pray for that person, of course... but also take care to visit them. Affirm your love and acceptance. Be discreet. If they share a personal issue with you, keep that issue private. Do not compel them to conform outwardly if they still have a problem inwardly. Try to find the cause of the problem and resolve it if you can. If you yourself cannot resolve it, arrange for them to see someone else who may be able to help.

The care of converts

Helping new believers to become fully converted is an essential part of cross-cultural mission. It receives far less attention than it should.

A gifted evangelist may enable large numbers of people to understand and accept the gospel very quickly at a superficial level. But the evangelist may not be the best person to secure a genuine and permanent conversion for each of them. Moving from place to place, he cannot easily provide the teaching and pastoral care they will need. They must be introduced to friends who can patiently help each one deal with personal questions, doubts and difficulties, and so become fully convinced and committed to Christ, to his teachings, and to the community of his people.

We sometimes call this the work of follow-up but it is far more than that. It is the essential task of the church, and all its members, to prepare new believers to be active and useful in service to others: “He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, *to equip the saints for the work of ministry*” (Eph 4:11-12).