

Conversion

A crucial biblical and theological concept, it is a turning or returning of a person to God. The word itself is relatively rare in Scripture. In the Old Testament the word is *sûb*, translated usually as “turn” or “return.” In the New Testament the basic root is *epistrēphō*. This word group is more similar to our common conception of conversion. *Metanoēō*, though a related idea, is usually translated “repent(ance).”

Theologically, conversion is usually understood as the manward aspect of salvation, corresponding to the Godward act of regeneration (the “new birth;” John 3:3, 5-8; Titus 3:5). It refers to a decisive turning of a sinner in repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5). It is a once for all unrepentable act. You are either converted or you are not converted. There is no middle or third way. Conversion is the initiation of the overall process of salvation.

In the Old Testament the concept of conversion is infrequent with the term “turn” or “convert” being used in a number of ways. (1) It can speak of a national conversion; of a pagan people like Nineveh in the past (Jonah 3:7-10); of a turning of Egypt (Isaiah 19:22) or the conversion of all the nations in the future (Ps. 22:27), and as is most often the case, a turning of Israel back to God. Israel’s conversion is marked by the making of a covenant and a renewed commitment to loyalty and faithfulness to God, which they had forsaken in the past (under Joshua, Jos. 24:25; Jehoida, 2 Kings 11:7; Asa, 2 Chron. 15:12; Hezekiah, 2 Chron. 29:10; Josiah, 2 Chron. 34:31). (2) There are accounts of individuals turning to God (sinners in general, Ps. 51:13; Naaman, 2 Kings 5; Josiah, 2 Kings 23:25; Manasseh, 2 Chron. 33:12ff). (3) There are even occasions when it is God who is said to be the one who turns or returns to His people (Isa. 63:17; Amos 9:14).

The psalmist affirms that the Word of God is essential in conversion (19:7). Isaiah connects conversion with righteousness (1:27), healing (6:10), mercy and pardon (55:7). Jeremiah identified conversion with the putting away of idols (4:1-2). Conversion is a genuine turning to God, which involves repentance, humility, a change of heart, and a sincere seeking after God (Deut. 4:29-30; 30:2, 10; Isaiah 6:9-10; Jer. 24:7). It results both in a new knowledge of God and His purposes (2 Chron. 33:13; Jer. 24:7).

In the New Testament a key text is Matthew 18:3, “unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Conversion is possible for anyone who comes to God with simple trust like a child before his parents. It is also instructive to note the only time *epistrēphō* (convert, return) is used of a believer is also found in the synoptic gospels concerning Peter’s return following his denials of Christ (Luke 22:32).

In Acts we discover calls to be converted as well as the record of a number of conversion experiences. Peter connected conversion with repentance and having one’s sins blotted out (3:19). Acts 11:20-21 affirms that believing in Jesus is involved in conversion. Paul affirms at Lystra that conversion involves turning from useless things to the living God (14:15, cf. 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Peter 2:25). The only occurrence of the noun form of the word “conversion” in the New Testament described Gentiles coming to salvation and the great joy it caused (15:3; cf. Luke 15:7, 10). In recounting his own conversion, Paul said the Lord commissioned him to preach to the Gentiles in

order “to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (26:18). There are conversions of various groups recorded in Acts: Jews at Pentecost (2:22-41), Samaritans (8:5ff), Gentiles (10:44-48) and disciples of John (19:1-7). There are also the conversion experiences of individuals. Some are quite dramatic with accompanying physical manifestations (e.g. Paul, 9:5ff; Cornelius, 10:44ff; also 15:7ff; note 15:19; the Philippian jailer, 16:29ff). Others are quiet and calm (the man from Ethiopia, 8:26-40; Lydia, 16:14). It is also interesting to note that Luke has 3 accounts of the conversion of Paul (9:5ff; 22:6ff; 26:12ff) as well as 3 accounts of the Gentile Cornelius (10:44ff; 11:15-18; 15:7ff). It is clear that God makes no racial distinction concerning those who may turn to Him. James adds a word of encouragement to the faithful evangelist, informing us that the one “who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20).

In a biblical theology, conversion has two sides, divine and human. It represents the infusion of divine grace into human life, and a resurrection from spiritual death to eternal life. We can turn only through the power of God’s grace and the calling of the Holy Spirit. Conversion is an event that initiates a process. It signifies the moment in time we are moved to respond to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. It begins the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit within us purifying us and conforming us in the image of Christ. Conversion is the beginning of our journey to Christian perfection. We can and should make progress toward perfection, but we can never attain it in this life. Even the converted need to maintain a life of ongoing repentance, and even the sanctified need to turn again to Christ and be cleansed anew (cf. Ps. 51:10-12; Luke 17:3-4; 22:32; Rom. 13:14; Eph. 4:22-24; 1 John 1:6-2:2; Rev. 2:4-5, 16; 3:19).

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