

TRUE CONVERSION

A Series from the book of Acts

By Steve Monts



Matthew 18:3

“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

CONVERSION SERIES OVERVIEW

What is Conversion?

Without conversion no one goes to heaven (Matt. 18:3). There are three characteristics of man subject to conversion. When these have been changed one has been converted to the Lord.

- The mind/heart (faith) – Romans 10:17, Mark 12:30
- The actions of life (repentance and confession) – Isaiah 55:7, Acts 17:30, Romans 10:9-10
- One's relationship to God (scriptural baptism) – Galatians 3:26-27, Romans 6:3-4, Acts 2:38

Without all three conversion has not occurred. We illustrate this in the following manner. A boy grows up thinking girls have “the cooties” but as they become young adults, they change their minds and “fall in love”. Next their actions change (they suddenly care about personal hygiene) and in time they begin to court a girl. While the boy's heart and actions are forever changed about girls in general, the boy is unmarried (no relationship change) to any girl until they exchange vows (Mal. 2:14). Marriage is the process that officially changes the relationship. The same is true in conversion, baptism is the process that officially changes the relationship. A person may believe in Christ and act as a Christian should but until they are baptized into Christ, they have not put on Christ (Gal. 3:26-27). You may lay Acts 2:38 next to Acts 3:19 to make the striking parallel. One says, “repent and be baptized” (2:38); the other says “repent and be converted” (3:19). This clearly demonstrates that at baptism one becomes initially converted.

The Conversion of Lydia — An Openhearted Woman

Lydia was one of a number of women who met by the riverside to pray (Acts 16:13-15). They were located in Philippi. They had great spiritual interest; the only problem is no preacher had ever been there yet. God had given Paul a vision in the night, a Macedonian call, and he and his fellow preachers went and so met these women. As Paul preached, the Bible tells us, “the Lord opened her heart” (Acts 16:14). From this comes the mistaken notion that God must miraculously and mysteriously open one's heart before they hear the message and believe it and obey it. However, such an erroneous doctrine puts the responsibility of conversion solely on God's shoulders alone. Thus, if one is not converted it is not because they chose not to obey the message but because God didn't open their hearts. Such is great folly. So how then do we explain what was said about Lydia? To do so, we must understand God's agents of conversion.

God always had messengers to speak His message; Hebrews 1:1-2 clearly establishes this. Jesus would be the last great messenger. But Jesus would leave this earth while having more to still say. Jesus chose men whom He promised the Holy Spirit to which would give them divine guidance in speaking the word without error (Jn. 14:25-26, 15:27, 16:13-14). These men would write the words of Christ in the New Testament (1 Cor. 14:37). In this way God opens the hearts of men,

when His word is taught and received (Jn. 6:44-45). Revelation 3:20 shows that Jesus stands at the door of the heart and knocks. If one hears His voice (His word) and they open the door, He will come in. Thus, this is the way the Lord opened Lydia's heart, the way He opens all men's hearts, through the teaching of God's word. If it were a miraculous working of the Spirit, then why did God even need to send Paul there to preach? This is why you don't find Christians where there are no Bibles.

The Conversion of the Jailer — Losing Your Life and Finding One Worth Living

There was a jailer in Philippi that God would have Paul and Silas meet. The only problem is that Paul and Silas were not in jail. Paul, due to his preaching, would soon be there. Having set a demon possessed girl free caused a great ruckus (Acts 16:18-24). Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison. They did not allow the discouragement to crush them. Instead, they sang hymns and prayed. All heard them including the jailer (Acts 16:25). At midnight an earthquake hits the jail and opens the doors and unlocks the handcuffs (Acts 16:26). The jailer, assuming all have run away, decides to take his life. He is like many who define their life by who they are and what they do. If their purpose is destroyed so too is their reason for living and some sadly take their lives. He was about to do that very thing. But Paul told him to do himself no harm. The jailer, learning that all were still there, now asks, "What must I do to be saved?" The answer given by Paul has been taken by many today to say that Paul believed in "Faith Only Salvation." This may be answered in the following manner.

- Acts 16:31 – does not say "believe only." People read the word "only" into the text. This was the first time the gospel was brought to Europe and most had never heard of Jesus. Paul started where they were at and informed the jailer generally of Jesus.
- Acts 16:32 – then he spoke the word to the jailer. If we say he was saved by the statement of verse 31, then we have the jailer saved before the word was spoken. God does not save independent of His word.
- Acts 16:33 – He had to be baptized. He did not delay his baptism; it was done at the same hour of the night because one cannot be converted until they have been baptized.
- Acts 16:34 - After, and not before his baptism, it says he "rejoiced having believed in God." Jesus said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved..." (Mk. 16:16). Doing what Jesus says shows you believe In Jesus. This man "rejoiced having believed."

The Conversion of Cornelius — Good People Need Saving Too

Some of the hardest people to present the gospel to are those who already do so many good works. People who say they love God and show forth actions to prove that causes us to hesitate in telling them about true conversion. We must remember good people need saving too.

Until Acts 10 the church was Jewish. That is, only Jews were seen as subjects of conversion. But with Cornelius that would all change as he was purely Gentile. The first disciples retained much of their Jewish upbringing. Many of their established customs and traditions would be hard to leave behind since they were so ingrained, just as many of our habits learned from childhood are hard to break. A Jew was taught from youth that milk drawn from a cow by Gentile hands was unclean. Bread and oil prepared by a Gentile could be resold, but never eaten by a Jew. If cooking utensils were bought from a Gentile, they had to first be purified by fire and water. These traditions would make it hard for Christians, who were former Jews, to bring the gospel to Gentiles.

Cornelius, a Gentile, was a Roman centurion meaning he had command over a 100 soldiers. He was a good man, who prayed to God, and gave generously (Acts 10:1-2). While many churches today would accept such a man into their membership believing he was saved, we learn he was lost (Acts 10:3-6, 11:13-14). He had not yet been converted. An angel tells him to send for Simon Peter. Why do so? Could not the angel have told him the plan of salvation? No. God's chosen agent to bring the word of Christ was the preaching of His word by men to men. He uses no miraculous messages of salvation today either. If one will learn of salvation, it will be by the word of God, the Bible.

The problem is that Peter, a Jewish Christian, must be prepared to go to Cornelius. God gives him a vision of unclean animals lowered in a blanket with the message to rise and eat. "No" shouts Peter, "I will not eat unclean animals." Three times God gives the vision, then the message, What God has cleansed you must not call unclean (Acts 10:15). This was a parallel to the Gentiles; people Jews believed deeply were unclean. At that moment, Peter had Gentile visitors requesting he come to Cornelius. Peter learns the lesson of the vision and goes with them. When he arrives he is surprised to see that Cornelius had rounded up many to hear the message of God (Acts 10:24, 33). Peter says he has learned that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34-35) and with that, begins preaching. Peter says one must work righteousness (have a change of life) and have faith in Christ (Acts 10:35, 43). While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household astonishing Peter and his companions (Acts 10:44-45). And with that he commands them to be baptized (Acts 10:48). Their conversion is now complete.

Some argue today that Cornelius was saved before he was baptized in water, in particular, when the Holy Spirit falls on him. Let the reader understand there were three miracles that took place, and none saved Cornelius. The first being when the angel spoke to Cornelius, he was still lost. When the vision came to Peter, Cornelius was still lost. When the Holy Spirit fell on him, he was still lost. Cornelius would have to hear words he was to obey. The angel himself told Cornelius, Peter will tell you words by which you will be saved (Acts 11:14). Cornelius would be commanded to be water baptized. This was his point of conversion.

So for what purpose did the Holy Spirit fall on them? Acts 11:15-18 makes it clear it was a sign for Peter and the other Jewish Christians with him, a sign that Gentiles should be preached to and converted. Peter says what happened to them happened to us “at the beginning.” He was referring to Acts 2. If Holy Spirit baptism happens each day one is converted, why then did he cite an example nearly 10 years prior? Holy Spirit baptism was so rare it only happened twice in history, Acts 2 and Acts 10. It would take this kind of miracle to change the minds of the Jewish Christians towards Gentiles. The upbringing they had regarding Gentiles must be destroyed in their minds and the Holy Spirit falling on them would do it (Acts 11:18). The gospel is for all.

From this conversion we learn that one may be a good moral person who prays to God always, yet be lost. Many today meet such criteria. Many today are in religious error and until they obey the gospel and are converted they stand lost as well. Let us be like Peter and bring them the message of salvation.

The Conversion of Saul — A Most Unlikely Convert

Saul of Tarsus was a faithful Jewish man. He was a rising star among the Hebrews and sought to persecute the church even to foreign cities. He sought to imprison the disciples of Christ, cause them to blaspheme, and put them to death, even the women (Acts 22:4, 19, 26:9-11). This does not sound like a man who would become a Christian, but he would be very soon. We are reminded by his conversion to not judge a book by its cover.

By studying this account we are able to easily answer some misconceptions regarding salvation. Notice the following:

- Acts 9:1, 23:1 - Sincerity alone does not save. No one was more sincere in his belief than Saul.
- Acts 9:3-5 - God does not speak directly to us to save us. God did not even do that for Saul. It was merely to establish him as a valid apostle (one who was chosen by the Lord and had seen the resurrected Lord (Acts 26:16-18, 1 Cor. 9:1).
- Acts 9:4-9 - Faith alone does not bring salvation or peace with God. He was a believer three days and nights but was in deep agony by the guilt of his unforgiven sins. He would be told what he **MUST** do in Damascus. At this point in the account Paul certainly has a change of mind and actions, but he has not had a change in relationship which takes place at baptism. He would soon learn he must do this (Acts 22:16).
- Acts 22:16 - Prayer is not “calling on the name of the Lord.” Many today believe it is praying the sinner’s prayer (which is nowhere found in the Bible). You will notice in this conversion the Bible says Paul called on the name of the Lord when he obeyed the gospel in baptism and not before then. Calling on the name of the Lord didn’t happen when Paul spoke with the Lord directly, and it didn’t happen when he was praying for three days.

What a remarkable story of redemption that God can take the worst of the worst and make them the best. Remember this when evangelizing.

The Conversion of the Eunuch — God Seeks a Truth Seeker

God has Philip leave the successful work of Samaria to head down to a deserted place, a road that traveled from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8:26). He would there meet a man of Ethiopia who was returning home from Jerusalem. God had Philip meet him on the road, instead of Jerusalem, for that would be the place where the eunuch would be reading Isaiah 53 wondering what he was reading. God always seeks to provide spiritual answers to those honestly searching. That is why Jesus said, “seek and you will find” (Matt. 7:7). Paul said, “...that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him. Yet He is actually not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). God sought this truth seeker and put a preacher there to teach him the truth.

We are encouraged by the obedience and boldness of Philip. He ran to the chariot and asked the eunuch if he understood what he was reading (Acts 8:30). We ought to be just as zealous in trying to study with people. The eunuch read a portion of Isaiah 53 that he needed explained. Philip preached Jesus to him from that text (Acts 8:32-35). Following the sermon the eunuch asks to be baptized. That teaches us that in order to preach Jesus you must preach about scriptural baptism. From his baptism we learn the following:

- Acts 8:37 - Faith proceeds baptism. Thus, infants and children who do not have the reasoning capacity to believe are not subjects of baptism.
- Acts 8:38-39 - Baptism is full immersion in water. It was not a sprinkling or pouring, which is done by so many denominations today.
- Acts 8:26 - Baptism is not merely a public confession of salvation already obtained. This was a deserted place, far removed from public, with only the eunuch and Philip mentioned. This was done simply because the eunuch wanted to be forgiven of his sins and become a Christian.
- Acts 8:38-39 - Baptism was not put off till some baptismal service. It was done immediately just as the jailer, in the same hour.
- Acts 8:39 - Rejoicing came after his baptism and not before. In every conversion account the rejoicing happened after baptism, the eunuch's is no exception.

Many today say they were saved when they did one or a combination of the following:

- First believed in Jesus.
- Said the sinner's prayer.
- Struck by the Holy Spirit.

- Baptized as an infant.

However, a simple look at the conversion of the eunuch shows each one of these to be false. To ask the eunuch what he did to be saved, he would say:

- The preacher preached Jesus to me and I listened to the word. – Acts 8:35
- We came to some water and I asked what hinders me to be baptized. – Acts 8:36
- The preacher said, “if you believe...you may.” – Acts 8:37
- I told him I believed. – Acts 8:37
- We went down into the water and he baptized me. – Acts 8:38
- When I came up out of the water, I rejoiced. – Acts 8:39

We encourage all to be saved like the eunuch was. Hear the word, believe the word, obey the word, and be baptized.

The eunuch’s conversion also encourages us as Christians to be busy doing the work of evangelism. When we do God will use us and put us providentially in the right place at the right time. God always works to get the truth to the truth seeker.

The Conversion of Simon — From Sorcery to Salvation

Simon was a Samaritan sorcerer. In the eyes of the Jews, this was a double whammy. God’s word had the strongest condemnation regarding sorcery (Deut. 18:9-14, Gal. 5:19-21). And the Jews considered Samaritans half-breed-lowlives and would not talk to them (Jn. 4:9). However, Philip would because the gospel was for all. We learned that Simon’s livelihood brought him a great following and in order to be a Christian, he would have to give it all up. This makes him an unlikely convert as well, but the power of the gospel could not be denied, thus, he surrendered all when he believed and was baptized (Acts 8:13).

Though the sacrifice that Simon would have to make was great (losing his means of making money, as well as confessing to his following that he was a complete fake), for many today, it was not great enough. Most churches today hold to the Calvinistic doctrine that once one is saved, they can never be lost. Simon would go on to sin again and be in a lost condition, therefore, they say he never really believed to begin with. This false view can be easily answered in the text.

- Acts 8:13 says he believed “also.” The word “also” connects Simon’s faith as the exact same faith as all the Samaritans that believed in verse 12. Thus, whatever you say about Simon’s faith, you say the same about all the other Samaritans “also.” Thus, if he did not truly believe, neither did all the baptized Samaritans “also.”

- The Holy Spirit said Simon believed, but lied if Simon only “pretended” to believe. If that were true, we can’t believe anything that the Holy Spirit recorded in divine scripture.
- When Simon sinned after baptism, he was told to, “Repent therefore of THIS thy wickedness” (Acts 8:22 ASV). He was not told to repent of a life of wickedness, but THIS one he had just committed. Had he never truly repented, it would have been a perfect time for Peter to call him out, but that was not the case; his conversion was genuine.
- Many other scriptures speak to a Christian’s ability to fall away (2 Pet. 2:10-22, Gal. 5:4, Jas. 5:19-20).

When converts to the Lord sin again, they must repent and pray that the thought of their heart may be forgiven (Acts 8:22).

The Non-Conversion of Felix — Don’t Delay!

Acts is the book of conversions, but it is also the book of non-conversions. We see that many did not convert to the Lord. Thousands in Acts 2 did not respond, the Jews in Acts 7 did not respond to Stephen’s preaching; Elymas the sorcerer withstood the faith; King Agrippa was almost persuaded but lost, and Felix the governor of Judah was also one who did not obey (Acts 24:24-27). It is important that we realize this because many we talk to will not be converted either, but that makes us no different from the first Christians. We learn in Felix the need to respond to the gospel when it is presented and not put it off. Hebrews 3:7 says, “Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts...” This is soul-saving advice that Felix sorely needed.

Paul preached a sermon comprised of three main points; righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come (Acts 24:25). Every point dealt with his audience. Felix was being admonished to start living the standard set by God, and to no longer be given to his passions and lusts (like his unscriptural marriage and love of money), and to think soberly about the fiery judgment to come. Paul’s sermon is a model for preachers today and any day. Preaching has long since drifted away from such boldness and frankness. Sinners need to hear they are in sin. The result was Felix trembled. However, Felix decided to wait till it was convenient (Acts 24:25). He would have two years to meet with Paul, but that convenient time never came. In Felix we learn the power of lost opportunity. Many tombstones reveal that death comes to all ages. Don’t put off for tomorrow when the Lord says, “Today” (Heb. 3:7). If you have been holding back from becoming a Christian, do so no longer. “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

The Non-Conversion of Agrippa — The “Almost Persuaded”

In our efforts to save souls most will turn us down right away. It is only a precious few that will actually give us a hearing. Among those few, fewer still will study with us for a long time. Of

those few, only a handful will become converted. While we rejoice at conversions, our hearts are heavy for the “almost persuaded.” They were so close to obeying the gospel, and many of them may have even agreed with the Bible in what must be done for conversion but for one reason or another, they would turn away. The names and faces of these “almost persuaded” are forever etched on our minds, and we are saddened every time we think of them. At times we wonder, what if we had just said something different or used a different scripture, and we begin to doubt our effectiveness to spread God’s word. The study of the “Non-Conversion of Agrippa” will help us with that.

The apostle Paul sought to win all men, but he would only win some (1 Cor. 9:19-22). Paul would in time meet the king of Judah, Agrippa, and be presented with a rare opportunity to preach to him. Paul, with great wisdom, started with things he and the king had in common. Paul was a Jew by nationality, like Agrippa (Acts 26:1-7). Paul even, at one time, persecuted Christians and put them to death, just like Agrippa’s relatives had done (Acts 26:9-11). Paul believed the Old Testament promised a messiah who would come, and Agrippa did too (Acts 26:22-23). Why, with so much in common, would Paul change? Thus, Paul shared his conversion account to explain why (Acts 26:12-19). After doing so, Paul asked, “Agrippa, do you believe...?” Paul had delivered a masterpiece. He had done everything “right” in sharing the truth. Would it convert Agrippa? Almost.

Agrippa said, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28). We can do everything right, but still not convert someone because only they are in control of their heart. They must choose. But the “almost” hurt us the most. But take heart, Paul never gave up or threw in the towel and neither can we! We will meet the “almost” in our journey, but it is necessary to find the “almost and altogether” (Acts 26:29). So teach on!

The Day of Pentecost Conversions — In The Beginning

Acts 2 has been called the hub of the Bible. It is where all things come together for the first time. Both Jesus and the apostles refer to it as “the beginning” (Lk. 24:47, Acts 11:15).

Jesus tells the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit would soon come to them (Acts 1:4-5). This was the promise of the Helper given in John 16:7-15. In Acts 2:1, when the day of Pentecost had come, so did the Holy Spirit also come to the apostles. It was no mistake it came on this day. Just as Jesus dying during Passover was no mistake either. Colossians 2:16-17 tells us that the Old Testament feast days were symbolic of Christ. Passover was symbolic of the true Lamb of God, killed for our sins. Pentecost was also known as the “Feast of Harvest” (Deut. 16:16-17). This was a time when the Jews would celebrate the blessings of harvest. This foreshadowed the work of Christ again. Now, on this day, the spiritual harvest has come; man can truly enjoy what Christ came to bring; the blessings can now be reaped. Salvation in Christ’s name has come.

The Holy Spirit came to the apostles and empowered them with the ability to speak foreign languages, not incoherent babble (Acts 2:4-13). The babble that some call tongue speaking today

could not convert one soul. However, foreign languages can speak and convert those of another tongue. Peter says this is what the prophet Joel was talking about (Joel 2:28-32). Joel foretold of this day saying the Spirit would be poured out and wonders be worked on this day. The audience was witnessing the unfolding of scripture that pointed to this day. With the proof of these miracles, which they are now witnessing, how can they deny the message about to be delivered?

The gospel was about to be presented for the first time. Peter's sermon can be outlined as such:

- The Life of Christ – Acts 2:22
- The Death of Christ – Acts 2:23
- The Resurrection of Christ – Acts 2:24-32
- The Exaltation of Christ – Acts 2:33-36
- The Call of All to Christ – Acts 2:38-39

We will highlight “the call of all to Christ” here. The audience has been brought to the point of faith which prompts the question, “What shall we do?” They believe they have murdered their King and Messiah. How can they be forgiven? They have had a conversion of the heart. Two more aspects still remain. Peter then says, “Repent (conversion of life's actions), and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (conversion of relationship) for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). This was the gospel given to all, “as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). Those who gladly received the word of conversion were baptized (Acts 2:40-41). And the church began; this is day one, the beginning (Acts 2:46-47).

The Series Application To Us

There was a purposeful reason to ending this series at the beginning. We have been able to study ahead in the book of Acts and know who the first Christians would soon meet and convert. They would convert people like Saul, Simon, Lydia, Cornelius, a jailer, a eunuch, and many others. **We know** they would meet these amazing people, but **they did not know** it yet. To me this is an amazing parallel to my effort here this week. The aim of this series is to jump start a congregation to evangelize again and to make an organized effort in doing so. As of today, we don't know who we are going to meet in the future. However, in Acts, chapter 2, neither did they, yet they still went into all the world. Let us be like them. Yes, most will reject God, but isn't it worth it if you can find a modern day eunuch, Lydia, Cornelius, or even Paul? You may only save one soul, but you never know what that one soul will do. It is time to work and be busy like the first Christians. They would go out into the world, and with the help of God, find these precious souls. God providentially will do the same today if we are willing to be used, and woe unto us if we are not.