

CONVERSIONS – THE FIRST DISCIPLES

Introduction

When the subject of religion comes up people talk about ‘converting’. But what does it mean? And is it the same thing – to Islam? To Catholicism? To Christ? To atheism?

Secularists view it only as a psychological or social phenomenon. But that is simplistic, e.g. Islam sometimes uses force whereas conversion to Christ is by definition voluntary (change of heart or attitude)

It is an important teaching of the Bible. So what is it? Look at examples, starting with Jesus’ first disciples.

Consider: the events; what they say about the first disciples; what they say about Jesus

Events

It was a time of renewed religious interest. The reasons included:

- The Roman occupation;
- The Pharisees keeping Jewish identity in people’s minds;
- Many ‘messiahs’ appeared leading rebellion;
- Dissatisfaction with religious leaders. They ‘impose heavy burdens but do not lift them with their little finger’
- Background of God’s promise to send ‘Messiah’ to save

John Baptist preached.

- John said, ‘I am not he’, but ‘the Kingdom of God is near’
- For that reason he called people to repent of sin. Examples are given of tax collectors, soldiers and others asking him what they should do.
- He spoke of Messiah at hand, and what he would do. By contrast, John only baptised with water (ineffective), whereas Messiah would give the Spirit of God (transforming).
- And he gathered followers. The message obviously appealed to something deep. That might resonate with us.
 - Longing of human heart
 - Today’s sense of need – evils threatening
 - Sense of leaders letting us down
 - Some have a background knowledge of Jesus – buried

He pointed his followers to Jesus

- He knew Jesus. He had baptised him. It had seemed the wrong thing to do for Jesus had no need to repent. He saw Jesus identify with sinners.
- He saw Spirit descend on him. God had spoken to him about that. So he had a prophetic message – ‘This is Messiah’
- That is similar to the message of Christians. Our experience and the Bible correspond.

John described him as 'The Lamb of God'

- They would see that as a reference to sacrifices offered to atone for sin.
- By calling Jesus 'Lamb of God' he suggested Jesus was unique – God's choice in contrast to all the sacrifices over the years.
- Strange way to describe a leader! – sacrificial lamb. But that is how Jesus is presented, and presented himself. 'If I am lifted up I will draw the whole world to me' – a reference to his death
- In practice it when we see that Jesus offered himself to put away our sin that we are drawn to him. 'We preach Christ crucified'

They met Jesus

- John's disciples wanted to meet him – to spend time with him. Jesus granted their request
- It is the same today – Christianity is about personal dealings with Jesus. It may start in different ways; but it becomes a relationship.
- One result was: Andrew told his brother Simon Peter – 'We have found the Messiah'. He had come to a decision about Jesus' identity – the person they were led to expect – the one and only.
- The Bible and his experience corresponded. This is what Christians have always said – the Christ's description and our experience correspond – it is him – longing fulfilled. Beware of scepticism – 'too good to be true' – sceptics say that about everything, so not evidence the claim is false
- Philip, and Nathaniel joined this group – similar experience even without John Baptist's contribution. They gave the same message to Nathaniel. He was sceptical till became obvious Jesus knew his inner thoughts. In the case of Philip Jesus just said, 'Follow me' – and he did

What it says about the disciples

At the beginning of the story they were ignorant – but they later became his trusted disciples. We were all ignorant at first so don't hesitate to come to him.

Some had been touched by John Baptist's message. They were willing to listen, and took it to heart so much they identified with him

They all had a concept of the Messiah albeit vague and distorted.

They were different.

- One was sceptical
- Two were influenced by the description – 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'
- Simon seemed to come out of curiosity – led by his brother
- So what influences us? Being in church shows an interest. Have we seen the need for moral and spiritual change – in ourselves and world around? Are we sceptical? but sufficiently curious to find out more

They were drawn to Jesus

- The first two only needed the description
- Andrew became convinced enough to bring his brother
- Nathaniel (initially sceptical) worshipped him
- Christianity is being drawn to Jesus. 'To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'
- It had a permanent effect – they became followers of Jesus. It is permanent – not something to be taken up then dropped like stony ground hearers. Jesus is faithful and calls us to be faithful

What it says about Jesus

He is part of a much bigger story.

- There is evidence for that. The Christ was long foretold, and Jesus fits the description
- His significance was foretold – 'Lamb'. The term 'Messiah' had content – Saviour of the world

It is the story of God's work. Jesus is God's Servant

- To put away human sin by removing the penalty and undoing its effects; to restore humanity from its brokenness.
- To reconcile God and man.
- Beware of cynicism – 'too good to be true'

This shows Jesus' story make sense. He did not appear out of nowhere. People 'recognised' him. This has the deepest significance – for us all

He is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'

- He came to bear the penalty of sin – so we may find pardon and good.
- He is for 'the world' – not a small ethnic or religious group. He says, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature'.
- That does not mean we all benefit – but he is there for us.

There is evidence to support this.

- The innocent was put to death and accepted it voluntary – he was bearing the guilt of others.
- In spite of bearing sin he was raised from the dead – evidence the penalty was exhausted.
- At Pentecost each one heard the message in his own language – it was meant for all

Jesus is a leader of men

- The title 'Messiah' shows that.
- He came to free the captives, open blind eyes, etc. – Isaiah 42.
- He acts on our behalf – on cross and on the throne.
- He rules and defends.
- He gives Holy Spirit so we may overcome the spiritual disease of sin

He inspires confidence and loyalty – his Person – his ability his faithfulness to complete his work.

Conclusion

Jesus is a unique, global figure. That is a big claim – but there is plenty evidence to support it.

Jesus has put away sin. That show God is ready to forgive. It shows God is calling us to return to him

Jesus welcomes and transforms people. He relates personally to people – there is no Christianity otherwise. And no one should hesitate to come to him

The difference today is he is that is not physically present. But as God he knows our heart – do we desire him? His Word and are Spirit present – we may hear him speak in the Bible.

How do we respond in practice to that information?

He is saying what he said to Philip, 'Follow me'