

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

A Profile of Christian Conversion

Introduction

Read 1:1. 1 Thessalonians is the first of two letters from Paul (key leader in the early Christian movement) to the church he planted in Thessalonica (key city in N. Greece – MAP). You can read about Paul’s initial visit to Thessalonica in Acts 17. 1 Thess. is Paul’s earliest letter (48 AD), and maybe the earliest book in the New Testament. Within a few weeks after arriving, he was driven out of town by people who rejected his message. After leaving, he sent his associate Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how these new Christians were doing. Timothy returned with good news, but also with some concerns about the church. So Paul wrote this letter to build them up in their new-found faith. He begins by celebrating their conversion (read 2:2-10).

Biblical Christianity emphasizes conversion. Our culture tends to view spirituality as a process of spiritual self-development—discovering and utilizing the spiritual resources that are already within you. But Christianity says that true spirituality begins as a crisis event when Jesus gives you spiritual life that you did not have before (TIMELINE WITH “X”). Jesus called this the “new birth” (Jn. 3) and He said that all of us need to be “born again” in order to enter God’s kingdom.

Paul’s celebration of the Thessalonians’ recent conversion provides us with a profile of Christian conversion which includes five key elements (NAME THEM). If you have truly been converted, you will recognize each of these elements. If you are investigating Christianity, these elements will help you to understand it better.

#1: The *initiator*: God

Re-read 1:4. This doesn’t mean that God favors some people and makes them convert, while rejecting others and preventing them from converting. The Bible is very clear that God wants *all* people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). It means that the initiative in our conversion always begins with God, not with us.

The Bible says that we are both so lost/deceived and so averse to God that left to ourselves, none of us would ever seek Him (Rom. 3:11; Jn. 6:44). But God seeks us out—not because we are so wonderful (we deserve His judgment), but because He is so merciful (Lk. 19:10). He seeks us out through a variety of means which we’ll talk more about in a moment about what this looks like. But the point is that when we become open to God and begin to consciously seek Him, this is because God has already been seeking us.

This is certainly the way it was for me. I was highly averse to God/Jesus Christ—partly because of negative early experiences with church, but more fundamentally because I wanted to run my own life. I used all the gifts that God had given me to promote my own self-coronation project. Yet in spite of all this and the mess I made of my life, He still came out to get me! If you had told me at the beginning of that day of my conversion that before it ended I would give my life to Christ, I would have laughed and sworn at you! Yet that’s what happened, and ever since that day I have been seeing more and more clearly how He had pursued me for years (“Hound of Heaven” quote).

So be careful—the living Christ is pursuing you! He is the “hound of heaven,” pursuing you down all the dark paths you travel to elude Him. You can reject the salvation He offers you, but you cannot prevent Him from pursuing you until your dying day!

#2: The *context*: the gospel, the Spirit’s conviction, and human messenger(s)

How does God seek us? 1:5 answers this, describing the *context* of Christian conversion (re-read). There are always three contextual factors in every conversion: the gospel, the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and at least one human messenger.

The gospel is the good news that Jesus is the true Lord who has come to save you. This good news is the *opposite* of what most people (including me) think Christianity is:

The good news is that you do *not* have to earn God’s acceptance through religious observance and/or moral improvement. The good news is that since Jesus’ death has paid for your sins, you can be completely and permanently forgiven by God.

The good news is that you do *not* have to relate to God impersonally—through fear or impersonal rules or rituals. The good news is that because Jesus is risen and accessible, you can have a personal love relationship with Him.

The good news is that you do *not* have to resolve all your doubts or clean yourself up morally before you can come to God. The good news is that because of what Jesus has done, God is prepared to meet you where you are and change you from the inside out.

God not only gives us this good news; His Spirit convicts us that this news is true and relevant to our lives. It is somewhat difficult to describe the Spirit’s conviction because it is experiential. It is easier to describe examples of this from my own conversion:

When I heard this message at age 11 and again at age 15, something told me: “This is true; you should respond to this.” Even now, I can see where I was sitting when I heard this message. I refused to do this both times—but I sensed this nonetheless.

Even at the height of my rejection of God, I was sometimes stricken with deep pangs of conscience—that I was using people, that I was hurting people who loved me, that I was truly morally wrong in the way I was living, and that I should turn away from this path. I could temporarily silence these pangs, but later they would pop up powerfully again.

When I argued with two recently converted friends, something told me that they had a peace and hope that I wanted but did not have. I didn’t admit this to them, but it made a deep impression on me nonetheless.

The moment I admitted to myself that I didn’t know how to make my life work, there immediately came very forcefully into my mind a verse (I didn’t know the reference): “I am standing at the door of your heart, knocking. Open the door, I will come in.” This was coupled with a strong sense of urgency (though I knew I could resist it) that I should take this step *now*.

God could have provided only the gospel and the Spirit’s conviction. But He has decided to reach out to us through weak and fallible human messengers (other Christians). Even in the rare cases when people get converted by simply reading the Bible or Christian

literature, they are still reading what God wrote through human messengers. Much more commonly, they hear this message from other Christians, and the Spirit's conviction comes at least in part through the changed life of the agents (as with Paul in 1:5b and the Christians involved in my own conversion).

The messengers don't have to be perfect or all-knowing or charismatic. The message and the Spirit do the heavy lifting—they simply to share the message and trust the Spirit to do His work, even though they have lots of shortcomings (Phil. 1:15-18).

#3: The *decision*: turn from idols to serve the living God

God takes the initiative as per #1 & #2—but then we must make a decision to respond to His initiative. The Bible describes this decision through many terms: receiving Christ, confessing Jesus as Lord, believing in Jesus, etc. In 1:9 (re-read), Paul describes this decision as a choice to turn—to turn *from* idols and to turn *to* serve the living and true God. This is what “repent” means (Acts 3:19)—to change your perspective and course.

Now Christians often make one of two mistakes in explaining this decision to seekers.

Some Christians *overload* this decision: “You must totally commit yourself to Jesus. You must believe with absolutely all of your heart that this message is the truth. You must turn away from every sin in your life.” This sounds devout—but it essentially makes salvation something you attain to by your great faith and moral commitment. Not even the most veteran Christian (who is honest) could ever say he has been fully committed, entirely free of doubt, or turned away from all sin in his heart! How dare we impose on seekers what we cannot even do ourselves!

Other Christians *dilute* this message: “You just need to mentally agree that this message is true. Just check off this box and go right on living the way you did before.” But you can see from this verse that this decision is something more than mere mental assent. It is an admission that you have been going the wrong way, serving the wrong masters, etc.—and it is bowing before God and allowing Him to take the lead in your life (however imperfectly we may follow).

Francis Schaeffer used two complementary descriptions of this decision. We hold up empty hands to God to receive a free gift that we could never earn. And we simultaneously bow before Him as the creature before the Creator, submitting to His leadership.

I know that Schaeffer's description fits the response God called me to at my conversion. I knew I could not rescue myself; I needed to be rescued. And I knew that this rescue involved allowing Him to begin to lead my life.

#4: The *result*: deliverance from God's wrath

Paul describes one of the wonderful results of Christian conversion in 1:10 (re-read). Note Paul's confidence—not “who *might* deliver us from His wrath if we are good/as long as we don't screw up too badly,” but “who delivers us from His wrath.” God's coming wrath/judgment is very real—but converted people are permanently safe from it. Christians sometimes call this “eternal security.”

What is the basis for this security? It does *not* come from the strength of our dedication to Jesus, or from how morally good we've been recently, or from how secure we feel. It is based entirely on Jesus past death which has completely taken God's judgment for all of my sins (which were all future when He died). This is what Paul explains in Rom. 5:1,2 (read and explain NLT).

#5: The *fruit*: hope, love for Christians, & desire to share Christ

Finally, Paul describes part of the fruit of Christian conversion. This fruit is partial, and it can vary for many different reasons—but it shows up in every true conversion. Paul speaks of three aspects of this fruit:

First, a new hope. You see this in 1:3 where Paul refers to their “steadfastness of hope in . . . Christ” and in 1:6 where he notes that they endured “much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” The point is that because we know we have delivered from God's wrath and are guaranteed of eternal life in God's kingdom, this hope changes the way we respond to difficult circumstances. We can keep going instead of giving up, and we can even have joy as we anticipate the future that outweighs (not cancels out) our sadness (BIRTHPANGS).

Second, a new love. Paul speaks of their “labor of love” in 1:3—and almost certainly he is referring to their love for one another (2 Thess. 1:3). When you meet Christ, you sense a new kinship with others who truly know Christ. You sense an affinity that is more important than your differences in age, culture, etc. You sense a loyalty to them because you are both loyal to the same Jesus. You have a new basis for commitment to serve one another (“labor”).

Third, a desire to share Christ with others. Re-read 1:8,9. Paul says that wherever he goes in Greece, he runs into people with whom they have shared how they came to Christ. He doesn't have to exhort them to share their faith because they are doing it naturally. When you know you've been forgiven, and that Christ is personally with you, and that you are headed for heaven—you *want* to tell others that this has happened to you. You may not be able to answer people's objections or questions, and you may keep silent sometimes out of fear—but you want to tell, not only because you want them to have it too, but also because telling others increases your own joy in what you have received!

Conclusion

There you have it—a profile of Christian conversion, five key elements involved in it. What is the take home for us?

If you are already converted, take time regularly to remember how Jesus sought you out and how He rescued you and gave you a new life! And make this a habit! It will keep you thankful and “sane.” Why not thank Him for this right now?

If you are not yet converted, all I can say is that you are not here by accident. Jesus is speaking to you through this teaching—offering you a life-changing relationship with Himself, and asking you to turn to Him. People sometimes ask me: “Why do you always talk about receiving Christ at these teachings?” Because you need to receive Christ!