

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## Christian Conversion – 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10

Many of us will be most used to thinking about conversion in the context of currency, where if we're abroad, we have to *convert* the price in Euros to the price in pounds, shilling and pence, to make sure we're not being ripped off! Or, people sometimes want to *convert* kilograms into pounds and ounces, or centimetres into inches, or have their loft *converted*, or buy a *convertible* car. But all those things carry something of what conversion is all about – a *change* from one state into another, *different* state.

Of course, when the word is used in the context of religion, we think about *people* converting from no faith to a faith, or converting from one faith to another. But society can sometimes be a little cynical about the possibility of people changing. 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks', we sometimes say, meaning: 'Don't bother with them, they're not going to change.' In fact, people don't have to be *old* dogs to be resistant to personal change. Psychologists tell us that our responses are fairly predictable from as young as four or five-years-old. Some people marry hoping their spouse will change, or even that they will be able to change their spouse. It's only ten or twenty or thirty years later they might finally say, 'Well, he or she is never going to change now!' As much as we might want to do so, we find it difficult to believe when some rough character has allegedly changed their ways, in the same way that Ananias was anxious about meeting Paul after Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:13-14). And then there's Nicodemus' question: can someone enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born again (John 3:4)? People *don't* change!

And yet, at the heart of the Christian faith is the claim that people can be changed, that people can be born again, that people can cross over from death to life, that people can be transplanted from a kingdom of darkness into

a kingdom of light, that people who were lost can be found, that people who were blind can see, that people who were in Adam can become new creations in Christ.

So, this passage allows us an opportunity to reflect on what Christian conversion is all about, allows us to discover ways of thinking about our own conversion, and be challenged about the implications of our conversion.

Much of the first chapter of the letter seems to be built around a series of triads. First of all, there are three authors – Paul, Silas, and Timothy (1:1). And there are three important verbs in 1:2-3 – thanking, mentioning, and remembering. And then are three virtues in 1:3 – faith, love, and hope. We will consider the rest of the chapter as three lots of threes!

So, where do we start in our thinking about Christian conversion? Where does Christian conversion begin? Take a look at verse 4...

### 1. Chosen: How did the Gospel come? (1:4-5)

This is where we start. Left to ourselves we might be right to be cynical about people changing. But conversion doesn't begin with us; it begins with God.

This notion of God choosing us is found throughout Scripture, but it's not always popular as a teaching. Sometimes we react negatively to the thought of being chosen because we want to be autonomous, our own bosses, in control of our own destiny – because that's what gives us self-worth. But, of course, that's exactly the point at stake: our significance is *not* rooted in what we can do for ourselves, but in what *God* has done for us.

Or, perhaps we're uncomfortable with the thought of being chosen, because it seems to suggest that we can just sit back and do anything and it won't matter. But, of course, the rest of the chapter makes it clear, as does the rest of Scripture, that God's choosing

produces changed lives. God chooses us for obedience, that we should become like Jesus, and keep his commands. 'I chose you', Jesus said to his disciples, 'to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.'

Most of all, perhaps, people don't like the thought of God choosing because it seems to paint a harsh picture of a God who chooses some but not others. That makes it especially important to notice what God's choosing is connected to. Look again at the start of verse 4: 'Brothers, *loved* by God...' God's *choice* of us flows out of his *love* for us! Paul says much the same in Ephesians 1:4-5 – 'For he *chose* us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In *love* he predestined us to be adopted as his sons.' So, we draw comfort from having been chosen, because it shows we are loved by God.

Moreover, Paul doesn't say that he *hopes* they were chosen, or he *thinks* they might possibly have been chosen; he says that he *knows* they were chosen – because he sees the marks of God at work in how the gospel came to them (1:4-5). There are three reasons why Paul knows that God has chosen them. So here's our first lot of threes! Paul speaks of the gospel message which came to them as coming...

- with *power*,
- with *the Holy Spirit*, and
- with *deep conviction*.

The gospel did come with words, and words are important. Looking back at Acts 17 helps here. Notice what Paul is doing in Acts 17:1-3. Paul *reasons* with them, using words. Paul appeals to the *mind* to persuade people. He didn't call people to believe without reason. In particular, he reasons with them from the *Scriptures*; it's not reason alone that will persuade people, but the Scriptures that make the difference. But, again, not just the Scriptures in general. In particular, he persuades them from the Scriptures about *Jesus* – that Jesus is the Messiah who was to suffer and die. It's a crucial pattern, isn't it? Reasoning, explaining, proving from the Scriptures, proclaiming Christ, all of which involves *words* – lots of words! So, words are important. Let's not forget that. But more is needed, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 –

'our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction'.

God worked powerfully through his word. The power at work is not the force of Paul's personality, or the power of eloquence, or the power of clever arguments, but the Spirit, working through the word. What did the Spirit do? The Spirit brought about deep conviction, enabling the hearers to hear, understand, and receive the word which came to them. Becoming a Christian is not simply about us grasping the gospel in our *heads* through someone explaining it to us, but the gospel grasping hold of us in our *hearts* through the powerful work of God's Spirit. Paul knows that they were chosen, he says, because God's word worked powerfully among them; God's Spirit produced deep conviction.

Notice that both the work of reasoning and explaining and persuading with *words* was needed, and the powerful, convicting work of the *Spirit* was needed. We have sometimes presented those as alternatives, as if the word is different from the Spirit. But of course, the Spirit works through the word; the word is made effective by the Spirit. So, we're right to honour the teaching ministry, as we seek to do in our church, but we also ask that God will work by his Spirit among us.

And there's another crucial factor too, mentioned at the end of verse 5. Their talk had been backed up by their walk. They had been living examples of their message. Again, it's possible to over-emphasise this – as if all that's really needed is living differently among people. If we only did that, we wouldn't need to speak at all. But that's not the case, is it? We need the *verbal* ministry of the word of God, we need the *vital* ministry of the Spirit of God, and we need the *visible* ministry of the life given over to God.

So, it's no surprise that this combined ministry of word, Spirit, and lifestyle brought about change, and that's what Paul goes on to speak about next.

## 2. Changed: What effect did the Gospel have? (1:6-8)

Paul writes about the effect of the gospel. In fact, he has already spoken about the change in their lives in verse 3, with their faith directed upwards, their love directed outwards, and their hope directed forwards. But he tells us more here; and, once again, we have another triad: they became imitators, they became models, they became heralds.

### (a) They became imitators (1:6)

They were imitators not just of the apostles, but of the Lord. Paul never shrunk from offering himself as an example to be copied. It was a healthy thing for these Christians to have good role models. In particular, they were imitators in that they welcomed the message with joy in spite of suffering. Both Jesus and the apostles before them maintained joy in the face of trials, a joy which could only be given by the Spirit, and now the Thessalonians are walking the same path. Becoming Christians hadn't brought them financial advantage or social status; it had brought them persecution and suffering. And yet, they welcomed the message with joy from the Spirit.

### (b) They became models (1:7)

Because they were imitating the Lord and the apostles, they too became models of what a Christian should be. We can see a faithful chain here: first the Lord, then his apostles, and then the converts who became a model to those around them, such that their faith had become known everywhere.

There is modelling at the heart of the Christian life. This is a challenge for us – to live in such a way that we are conformed to the image of Christ so that others in turn are influenced by us and themselves become conformed to the image of Christ. Modelling might begin in the family, with parents modelling to their children – and that can be scary when you realise your child does something or says something because you've modelled it for them! Or it might happen with friends modelling in their friendship groups, or with

Christians modelling to colleagues in a workplace situation.

Important though that is, Paul doesn't speak about models (plural), but *model* (singular) – which means it is the *whole church* that had become a model. So the whole church was functioning this way, responding to suffering with joy. It's often said that the church is the only institution that exists for the benefit of its non-members – but the way we do that, it seems, is not by trying to be trendy, not by trying to fit in with everyone else, but precisely by being different, by *being the church*, by modelling a community called into being by God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Interestingly, here the Thessalonians are a model to other believers. That's a great compliment, isn't it? Other Christians living miles away were saying, 'That's what church ought to be like!'

### (c) They became heralds (1:8)

Being imitators and models has to do with lifestyle, but they were also effective in word too. The visible message came before the verbal message. We proclaim the gospel best when we back it up with lifestyle. And we are told that the Lord's message 'rang out' from them. That word carries the sense of a loud resounding noise, like ocean waves, or repeated blowing of trumpets, or like a gong which resounds and reverberates. The Lord's message *echoed* from them, and it spread to Macedonia and Achaia, the northern and southern areas of Greece. They'd been Christians for only a few months at the most, and already people hundreds of miles away were talking of what had gone on, so extraordinary was it, so strange was it, so unlike anything they had ever heard of.

With our words and lives we are to do the same. We're to pass on the truth, verbally and visibly. In fact, so effective was their message that Paul's efforts at evangelism had been helped by them; they had prepared the ground for him. Verses 8-10 tell us what people observed in these Thessalonians. People were accurately able to sum up what had happened to them, because the Thessalonians who had come to know Jesus had it ringing out of them.

What had happened to them? They had been *converted*: this is the difference the gospel had made.

### **3. Converted: What difference did the Gospel make? (1:9-10)**

Once again, we have a triad, showing the threefold difference the gospel makes.

#### **(a) Turning (1:9)**

There is a past dimension – ‘you turned to God from idols’. Here is the pattern of conversion: we stop going in one direction and we turn and go in another direction. They turned from their old life to a new life, to God from idols. From idols which are visible, numerous, dead, and false; to the true God who is invisible, one, living, and true.

This was revolutionary in the first-century context. There were Roman and Greek gods everywhere, different gods needing to be prayed to for different daily activities. Some Roman emperors at this time stylised themselves as gods, or sons of gods, who people worshipped. The city of Rome itself was deified as a god, with shrines everywhere. Into this context comes Paul telling them that there was only one God, and only this God was living and true, and that this God had one son, Jesus, who had been raised from the dead by God.

#### **(b) Serving (1:9)**

This is the present dimension – they were now serving the living and true God.

#### **(c) Waiting (1:10)**

And the future dimension is found in verse 10 – they were waiting for the return of the Son from heaven. Paul will have more to say about this later in the letter. They have turned to God, they have become his servants, and they are looking forward to the day when they will see who they have believed.

They were waiting for that day, as we are waiting for that day, for Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. We know from elsewhere in Scripture that Jesus has already

suffered the wrath of God on the cross, so there will be no wrath for us on that day, and we can wait with confidence and trust.

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It’s a rich passage, isn’t it? Ideally, it needs considerable time to reflect on it, and to think through its implications for us as a church. At the very least, what we need to do is ask the question, Are we reading anything about ourselves – ourselves as individuals and ourselves as a local church? Have we experienced the marks which show that we are loved by God and chosen by him? Have we seen the confirmations which show the change brought about by the gospel? Have we welcomed the message of Christ? Do we show any evidence of imitating Jesus and of modelling him to others? Is our difference in lifestyle gossiped about among our friends and contacts? Perhaps most crucially of all, have we experienced conversion? Have we turned, and are we serving the true and living God, waiting for his Son?

Let’s read the passage, and re-read it, and reflect on its significance for us as individual men and women of God, and for us as a local body of his people in Northolt. Let’s pray not only that God will help us understand his word to us in this letter, but that he would make us worthy of the things that are written in it, for his own glory. Amen.

*Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 23 September 2007*