

What is Conversion? Using Material from several writers outline and assess some of the contemporary understandings of conversion.

Depending on your perspective, whether theological or social scientific, liberal or evangelical, sacramental or pentecostal, conversion can mean very different things. Conversion is whatever a particular group says it is according to Rambo¹ and according to Atkins a contemporary understanding of conversion is a slippery fish to grasp². Indeed Grenz calls conversion a mystery³ and Pawson⁴ outlines how conversion can mean both the whole process and equally some of its component parts. Therein lie the difficulties in answering the question.

I will start by defining Christian conversion through the concepts of Pawson since he eruditely describes many of the common features of conversion found in other theological writings. I will then evaluate this in the light of other writers and explore areas of difference. Finally, I will look at the unique contributions of the social sciences. I am taking work of approximately the last twenty years as my definition of contemporary, except when necessary to draw out clearer examples of a current understanding or to understand the influences that have led to a particular position.

For Pawson true conversion is described as the 'normal' Christian birth and 'normal' being what he thinks should be involved.⁵ (The 'should', comes from his analogy of what is needed for a 'healthy birth' or initiation into the Kingdom of God and based on what he sees as the

¹ Rambo LR, 'The Psychology of Conversion' (Maloney HN & Southard S, (ed) *Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Alabama: REP, 1992)) p 160

² Atkins M, *Lecture Notes* (Sheffield: Cliff College, 2002) p 3

³ Grenz SJ, *Theology for the Community of God* (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1994) p 529

⁴ Pawson D, *The Normal Christian Birth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) p 82

⁵ *Ibid* p249

biblical imperative.) Conversion consists of true repentance and genuine faith, expressed and effected in water baptism, with a conscious reception of the Holy Spirit.⁶ These four areas are distinct, all equal and all necessary. He says however, that different church streams (arguably the practical out-working of contemporary understandings of conversion) emphasise different parts of these four areas.⁷ As a result they are wrong in their understanding of conversion and culpable for the effect their practices have in delivering ‘unhealthy’ converts.

What then is repentance? Pawson reluctantly uses what he describes as a cliché in saying that repentance is more than just feeling sorry.⁸ It involves three dimensions: thought (conviction), word (confession) and deed (correction). The thought aspect is built on the idea that ‘repent’ (Greek: *metanoō*) literally means to change one’s mind. It involves a true awareness of who God is and the impact of sin (both general sin and specific sins). He then takes the internal aspect of thinking and leads onto external action. Firstly confession. This verbalisation (he does not expand where or to whom) serves to help the confessor take responsibility for their sins. He also adds renunciation of sin to the verbal part of repentance. For Pawson the physical act/deed is the correction of past sins. He says that conversion as a biblical concept means to turn around. Here then, correction is the ‘turning away’ from sin part of ‘turning towards’ God.

Grenz agrees that repentance involves a radical alteration. It leads to a mental, emotional and volitional change but he stops short of the need for corrective action.⁹ He says that the turning to God is inseparable from a turn to others, a turn to creation and a turn inwardly to accept ourselves and live as God intended our lives. Green talks in similar vein about a turn

⁶ Ibid p 5

⁷ Ibid p 11 – Liberals emphasise repentance, Evangelicals – faith, Sacramentals – water baptism, Pentecostals – Spirit baptism.

⁸ Ibid p23

to God, the world and others.¹⁰ Wallis says that repentance must be more than an emotional release and he outlines distinctive actions that demonstrate when this is the case¹¹. I am challenged by and attracted to the subtlety of the radical nature of Pawson's view. He would appear to be unique in the writers I've surveyed by including restitution. Even if other authors agreed with him on the importance of radical actions or change in lifestyle, he seems to be the only one to include the dimension of repair.

After repentance comes faith. Pawson breaks down the components of faith. There is faith in the historical intervention of God through Jesus, personal faith that makes it more than a credal confession and intellectual assent, verbal faith (to God and to others), practical faith (acts of service) and continual or persevering faith. Grenz and Pawson agree that repentance and faith are arguably intertwined and largely agree on its components.

So far we have seen relative unity in looking at what is conversion. Contemporary understandings diverge as we look at Pawson's final two categories; Baptism in water and in the Holy Spirit. They diverge still further in looking at the nature of the change that takes place at conversion, its timescale and the extent of and interplay between the individual and community.

Pawson says that Baptism is a necessary part of true conversion, in this holding an almost sacramental position. It is not merely symbolic but imperative to the process of the 'normal' Christian birth. Grenz disagrees. He says there is no biblical consensus that conversion is linked to baptism and therefore essential for salvation.¹² He argues that faith and repentance

⁹ Grenz p531

¹⁰ Green M, *Evangelism Through the Local Church* (Sevenoaks: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990) p 37

¹¹ Wallis J, *The Call to Conversion* (Herts: Lion Publishing, 1986) p 4 and his later comments on pacifism

¹² Grenz p 560f

are the essential components. Grenz acknowledges the importance of baptism but says to give it salvific value would be to remove it from the context of public expression and initiation. I agree with Abraham who says that baptism is important because to enter the Kingdom of God involves us entering the community of the Kingdom.¹³ The relationship of Baptism to conversion is in my personal ministry a key issue. I work for Youth for Christ, an organisation whose purpose is evangelism to young people. For the sake of ecumenical harmony it does not baptise. Does this then question the validity of its evangelistic endeavours? At the very least it must question the completeness of its activities. A similar issue would also be raised for the Salvation Army who do not baptise. Pawson suggests a way to remove this dilemma.¹⁴

He suggests that it is only an issue if you view conversion as the process that distinguishes vertically between the saved and the unsaved. However, if you view conversion and salvation as a horizontal process with the past being the point you were justified, the present your ongoing sanctification and the future as when you will be glorified, the importance is that you have started and not ended the journey. Wallis puts it another way, but makes the same point. He says that conversion is not an end in itself, rather the first step of entry into the kingdom.¹⁵ I prefer personally the view that conversion is a start rather than the end. I do so because it has the tendency to be less legalistic and creates more ideological room to acknowledge that there is no one formula for entering the Kingdom of God.¹⁶

¹³ Abraham WJ, *The Art of Evangelism* (Sheffield: Cliff College Publishing, 1993) p 66

¹⁴ Pawson P301

¹⁵ Wallis p9

¹⁶ Hill M, (ed) *Entering the Kingdom* (MARC Europe, British Church Growth Association, 1986) p 134

Pawson holds what Grenz calls the standard Pentecostal pneumatology.¹⁷ He says that believing and receiving are not the same thing, you need a subsequent experience of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ Grenz, placing a close link between water baptism and that of the Holy Spirit, states that we do not need or have reason to expect a subsequent experience of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Often this debate is one of controversy and intense emotion. Yet in the context of conversion this potential animosity is lessened if we follow through that conversion is a beginning and not the end. Then the debate is a semantic one about the order of steps taken or whether one step or two has been taken rather than of what steps one *should* take in order to enter the Kingdom of God.

Pawson and Grenz approach conversion in a prescriptive manner. Though describing conversion there is a strong pretext as to what it should be rather than what it is. It is as if they provide a map of the journey but I prefer the way Abraham approaches the subject; as if he paints the landscape along the way. He is more descriptive and broader in the range of things he includes for entering the Kingdom.²⁰ He looks at different dimensions in a broader sweep that include the detailed view of Pawson but develops it further rooting it in the diversity of the Kingdom of God. I get the impression from Abraham that entering the kingdom is a much deeper and richer affair than that described by Pawson and covers a broader sweep of time.

The role of the community of faith is an obvious gap in Pawson's definition of what conversion is. According to Grenz²¹ conversion is something that happens in the context of

¹⁷ Grenz p545

¹⁸ Pawson p59f

¹⁹ Grenz p550

²⁰ Abraham, *Art of Evangelism* p62 – there is a moral dimension, experiential dimension, theological dimension, horizontal dimension, operational dimension and disciplinary dimension.

²¹ Ibid p551

the faith community. Without that community there is no conversion. It is the community of faith that proclaims the gospel and incorporates the believer. A point Abraham emphasises saying that we do not exist separate to the web of our social relationships.²² Green also acknowledges that the community of faith must be part of the definition of conversion because it is the presence and proclamation of the church that initiates with the Holy Spirit the conversion process.²³

Newbigin and Kraft also look at community but analysing it as a recipient of those converted and how this affects our definition of conversion. Kraft²⁴ points out that often conversion is defined as converting to a culture that is not natural for the convert. This is cultural conversion. Newbigin²⁵ critiques this in the context of cross-cultural mission and the idea of mission stations. He says it is wrong when a convert is converted to faith and/or is converted to the foreign culture of the mission station with the cultural standards and ethical norms of the missionary. He argues that this is wrong because it devalues the basic human identity of the convert.

We must also explore in answering what is conversion, the extent to which it is primarily individual or corporate and the respective merits. We have already seen how repentance and faith are significantly individual activities; the convert must repent of their own sins, salvation depends on their own faith. Spindler²⁶ suggests that personal conversion is an invention of the enlightenment, prior to which we spoke only of conversion of the gentiles – a collective

²² Abraham WJ, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) p128

²³ Green M p 36f

²⁴ Kraft CH, *Christianity in Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979) p339

²⁵ Newbigin L, *The Open Secret* (London: SPCK, 1995) p141f

²⁶ Spindler MR, 'Conversion Revisited: Present Understanding of a Classic Missionary Motive', *Missiology: An International Review* Vol XXV, Number 3 (1997), pp. 293-305 (p299)

concept. Wallis says that conversion has everything to do with community.²⁷ Community for him is the fruit of conversion, the place of conversion and the test of any theology of conversion - conversion is dying to self and becoming part of something bigger. The danger of an emphasis on personal conversion is that it can lead merely to a series of private ethical decisions and might not lead to a radical life of obedience, which I agree with Wallis, must include aspects of social justice and transformation. Like many things, however I believe it is about holding things in tension. It should centrally include the impact, role and necessity of community without doing so at the expense of recognising that God also calls individuals, and individual conversion is necessary.

Spindler summarises some recent anthropological theories concerning conversion, which impact directly on the interplay between individual and community. These theories are concerned with the effect on people and society and as such have conversion as a purely human activity. He cites a theory put forward by Hefner²⁸ that conversion is about the individual accessing a new or larger macrocosm, from the village mentality to the urban or international. Religion then serves to educate humankind. Horton, also cited by Spindler, argues that this change in perspective could have happened irrespective of any religious view. Spindler then uses Van der Veer to develop this further looking at conversion as the mechanism that causes the Self to breakthrough, it is a technology of the Self that enables a new organisation of society. Conversion is therefore social, cultural and individual.²⁹ I think there is some merit in these understandings but I disagree with their assumption that conversion is merely a beneficial process to world Modernisation. However, they are right that conversion is about joining something bigger than ones self – the Kingdom of God – and

²⁷ Wallis p115

²⁸ Spindler p296-297

²⁹ Douglas W & Soroggs JR, 'Some Social Scientific Perspectives', *The Ecumenical Review* XIX Number 3 (1967), pp. 307–309 (p309)

that the community of faith is a different way of ordering society than that which the convert is often previously apart.

For Pawson and others, conversion, through repentance, turning away from sin and towards God, entails a change in behaviour. There are differences however, as to whether the change in behaviour is necessary for conversion, a by-product of conversion and the nature of that change. Kraft points out that conversion is a change of allegiance, which leads to a new principle of evaluation and interpretation. Seeing things in this new way leads to a new way of behaving.³⁰ The change in behaviour is therefore a by-product. He also says that the change in behaviour will be less radical where the convert has grown up in the culture of what they convert to, hence they have already accepted many of the cultural and social norms. This is important because if one looks for radical change either as evidence of conversion, or part of the conversion process we ignore the fact that change will be relative to each convert's starting point on the journey of faith.

Newbigin³¹ equates conversion to a change in conduct to be like Christ. This poses a challenge. What does it mean to be like Christ? Often this manifests itself in a list of things one should do or not do, which in turn becomes a series of hurdles that must be jumped over *before* entering the kingdom. Glasser³² equates this to a western mindset which, using sociological terminology, he equates this model of Kingdom to be a bounded set. (This means it has a firm boundary making it obvious whether you are in or not. E.g. doctrinal or behavioural standards that need to be kept.) He goes on to suggest that another way of viewing change and the community is through a centred set model. Here people are defined

³⁰ Kraft p344

³¹ Newbigin p136

³² Glasser A, 'An International Perspective, (Hill M, (ed) *Entering the Kingdom* (MARC Europe, British Church Growth Association, 1986)) pp22-38 (p26)

by their relationship to the centre (Jesus Christ) and their movement towards him. I prefer this description of change because it is less legalistic, encourages a dynamic rather than static perspective and recognises that each person's journey will be unique.

Gaventa³³ in a study of the New Testament identifies three types of change that take place at conversion, three ways of describing the content of conversion. Firstly *alternation*. In this type of conversion the content is a natural progression of previous choices. Secondly, a *pendulum*, where there is a rejection of past convictions and affiliations. Finally, *transformation* where a new way of perception forces the radical reinterpretation of the past. I find this typology useful in describing the nature of change, whereas many of the other writers prescribe what the nature of change should be. At first it would appear simple to apply. Yet we have already said how conversion is complex and multifaceted. Gaventa uses the apostle Paul as an example of both transformation and alternation. Bosch³⁴, quoting Stendahl, merely alternation. This shows that regardless of the typology of conversion, whenever we observe conversion from the outside, different conclusions are inevitable, because in part they must comment on the unseen internal thoughts, emotions and volition of the convert.

In answering what conversion is we must also explore its relationship to time – is it a single process or a series of steps? Is it instantaneous or gradual? Lane³⁵ argues that theologically it is a single event, which may in practice happen gradually over a period of time and in stages. At first reading he would appear to be hedging his bets but he is saying that conversion is one event. It has certain components whose time and expression will vary for each individual. To use an analogy, a game of football that will still be one game, but may or may not have half

³³ Gaventa BR, *From Darkness to Light* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) p 12f

³⁴ Bosch DJ, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 2000) p125

time to pause for breath! Finney in his research on the way people came to faith³⁶ found that 31% could date their conversion and 69% could not and that the average time to discover God was four years. Pawson³⁷ disagrees strongly. He says that it is unbiblical to remember the day of ones conversion. I prefer the more tempered and for me realistic and pragmatic view of Morris³⁸ who says that there is no conversion so instantaneous that it happens overnight and at the other end of the spectrum, no conversion so gradual that the person is unaware of God working in them. Green³⁹ acknowledges that there will always be some history behind any act of commitment. There have been ways to try and describe and quantify this history. Wimber utilises an adapted version of the Engel scale to outline the process of conversion.⁴⁰ This scale starts at -10 with steps through to 0 where a decision is made and then steps to +3 which involve growing in faith. These measures are useful as descriptive tools. Although there is a danger in that they could prescribe that conversion must be linear and staged whereas often it is far more circular and rambling!

Regardless of whether the conversion is instant or gradual there seems some agreement that it must be preceded by a crisis or disorientation. Rambo⁴¹ says that this crisis could be religious, political, cultural, psychological or a change in life situation. Abraham⁴² says that we need to stress the importance of both crisis and process, as one without the other is inadequate and misleading. These crises also give a clue to motivations for conversion from the social science perspective.

³⁵ Lane ANS, 'Conversion: a comparison of Calvin and Spener', *Thermelios* Vol 13 No 1 (1987) pp.19-21 (p21)

³⁶ Finney J, *Finding Faith Today* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1999) p24

³⁷ Pawson p79

³⁸ Morris GE, *The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1981) p126

³⁹ Green p 36

⁴⁰ Wimber J with Springer K, *Power Evangelism* (Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992) p107

⁴¹ Rambo p165

⁴² Abraham, *Art of Evangelism* p65

Rambo citing Ullman⁴³ includes a variety of emotional factors and problematic relationships as the precursor to conversion. Klaiber⁴⁴ citing the work of Lofland and Skanovd lists 6 other motives or types of conversion. The intellectual – seeking after God, the mystical – surprised by god, experimental – ‘trying out’ a new religion, affectional – attracted to the warmth of a fellowship, revivalist – dramatic conversion under influence of suggestive proclamation and experience, the coercive – brainwashing under extreme force. I feel uncomfortable with Ullmans ideas because they suggest by implication that conversion is for those who stereotypically need faith as some kind of emotional crutch.

I turn now to look at a final contribution from the social science perspective, looking at conversion in the light of faith development theory. Fowler⁴⁵ and Tomlinson⁴⁶ both set conversion against the backdrop of faith development. They view faith as something in its own right that can be measured and described. Tomlinson has four levels and Fowler seven. Each of these levels involves a different level of faith maturity, comparative in many ways to stages of child development. For Fowler, conversion is a change in the *contents* of Faith.⁴⁷ As such, conversion can mean a change within the stage of faith a person is on or could simply be a recentering of ones images of value and power, the adoption of a new set of master stories but within the same level of faith. These insights from faith development are useful in our understanding of conversion for several reasons. Conversion at different levels of Faith will have a bearing on the experience and perspective that the convert has. As such it is a challenge not to attempt to make all conversion experiences the same. It is also however, a reminder that since conversion is but a beginning we should not neglect to help converts mature in Faith as well as the Faith.

⁴³ Rambo p166

⁴⁴ Klaiber W, *Call and Response* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) p188

⁴⁵ Fowler JW, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985)

⁴⁶ Tomlinson D, *The Post Evangelical* (London: Triangle, 1995)

To conclude, what is conversion? Certainly it involves a radical alteration in lifestyle, through faith and repentance. Yet there is no consensus as to what that means. Conversion is a turn from sin towards God. It is a multifaceted event that can not be dislocated from the community of faith, whether through baptism, social action or individual 'improvement' yet conversion is unique to each convert. I think it is more beneficial to view conversion as the beginning rather than the end because it simplifies and removes controversy that can hinder evangelistic efforts. Also, by viewing conversion in this way the emphasis shifts to growing maturity of faith rather than a focus on the number of converts.

Word Count:- 3, 292

⁴⁷ Fowler, p 281

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Abbreviations

REP = Religious Education Press

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