

Study 42: Conversions in the book of Acts

Introduction

The book of Acts provides us with working examples of what the early Christians were doing, like no other book in the New Testament. We have noted all of the conversions as we have passed through the book, but by seeing them all together, it will help us to get the complete picture of what was happening.

Importantly, our understanding of the conversion process is ***the key issue*** in the book of Acts. The whole reason and purpose of the gospel is to bring man back into relationship with God, and the examples of conversion from the book of Acts cannot be underestimated.

Body of the Study

Acts 2 - The day of Pentecost

Acts 3 – The Temple

Acts 8 – Simon the Sorcerer

Acts 8 – The Eunuch

Acts 9 - Saul

Acts 10 – Cornelius

Acts 16 – Lydia

Acts 16 – The Jailer

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *At what point were the people who were converted in the book of Acts forgiven of their sins?*
- *Re-assess your own personal situation with God. What is your relationship to Christ? If you are not “in Christ”, do something to rectify that situation whilst you still have the opportunity.*

Notes for Study 42: Conversions in the book of Acts

Introduction

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Body of the Study

Acts 2 - The day of Pentecost

The day of Pentecost was the very time when the city was crowded with people who had come from all over the world to worship the true and living God. It was very soon after Jesus' death, and only 10 days after His ascension.

The miraculous events at Pentecost had aroused the attention of the people, and given them a reason to listen to what Peter had to say. The miraculous *tongues of fire* did not reveal to the people what they had to do, or miraculously impart knowledge to them. But after having their attention, Peter said to them: "...listen carefully to what I have to say..." (2:14 JB Phillips).

God wants us to have knowledge and understand by *hearing* (listening to) the preaching of the word, not by miraculous revelation – "...for faith comes by hearing...the word of God..." (Rom 10:17).

Peter proceeded to preach to them, and we have analysed his sermon in study 3 (Chapter 2), so we won't go through it again here. Peter led them to the conclusion that they were responsible for killing the very Messiah that they and their fathers had been looking for for thousands of years.

When they realised what they had done, they cried out to Peter "...what shall we do?..." (2:37). Peter told them what they had to do "...You must repent, and every one of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, so that you may have your sins forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (2:38, JB Phillips). Even although they had realised that they were the ones who were responsible for Jesus' death, and they were sorry for what they had done, Peter told them that they needed to repent. So, we can see that repentance is more than just being sorry for what they had done. They needed to turn their life around – to stop fighting *against* God, and start fighting *for* Him.

They needed to be baptised – immersed in water – so that they might have their sins forgiven. Our baptism symbolises the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3-11). It further signifies the death of our sinful lives, our washing with the blood of Jesus, and our rising out of the water to live a new life. But notice that Peter says that they needed to do this "...so that you might have your sins forgiven..." It was at the point where they were baptised that they demonstrated their obedience to God. Baptism has nothing to do with the washing of our bodies, but has everything to do with our obedience to God (1 Pet 3:21).

Finally, Peter told them that when they obeyed God (by being baptised) they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a complex subject, and far too difficult to cover here. But Peter was telling them that they would receive the Holy Spirit (the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who intercedes between our spirit and God), and *not* some gift that is brought by the Holy Spirit. A study on the Holy Spirit can be found in the Romans notes, study 10.

The people did exactly what Peter told them to do, "...and the same day there were added to their number 3000 souls..." (2:41)

So, what we have happening here was:

1. A means of getting attention (The miraculous events)
2. The preaching of the gospel
3. Their conviction that they had sinned (Faith in Jesus truly being the Messiah)
4. Their repentance – turning away from sin and turning to God
5. Their baptism (immersion into Jesus Christ)
6. Their receipt of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 3 – The Temple

It was still Jerusalem and probably only a few days after Pentecost. The occasion was the healing of the lame man in the Temple. This provided the opportunity, and the means of getting attention.

Peter preached to the people again. He presented Jesus as the one who had healed the lame man – it was not anything done by them, but by the power of God (3:12 -). Indeed, Jesus was the fulfilment of the prophecies concerning the Messiah (3:18), “...*but you have killed Him...*” (3:13-15).

What they needed to do was to “...*Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...*” (3:19 NKJV).

Peter paralleled exactly what he did and said in chapter 2. We don't know the hearts of the people, as before Peter could finish, he was cut off by the priests, the captain of the Temple, and the Sadducees (4:1). However we do know that Peter continued this preaching a little while later (4:33) that they gave witness to the resurrection with great power, and that “...*many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to be about 5,000...*” (4:4 NKJV).

As in chapter 2, Peter told them to *repent* (3:19), but that was not all. He told them to *repent and be converted*. The purpose of their conversion was “...*so that their sins might be blotted out...*” And as we have seen from chapter 2, this was exactly why he told them to be baptised. So, in chapter 2 he told them to “...*repent and be baptised...*”, and in chapter 3 he told them to “...*repent and be converted...*” for exactly the same purpose. The only reasonable conclusion is that *being baptised* and *being converted* are the same thing (at least baptism is a part of the process of being converted – it is not the whole process as we have already noted and we will see again later).

Peter further says to them “...*so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...*” (3:19 NKJV). The Jewish context is the culmination and the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Messiah redeeming his people. This resulted in being in fellowship with God, and salvation.

So, in chapter 3 we have:

1. A means of getting attention (The healing of the lame man)
2. The preaching of the gospel
3. (By implication, their conviction that they had sinned (Faith in Jesus truly being the Messiah))
4. (By implication, their repentance – as they are told to do it)
5. Their baptism (again by implication, as they are told to be converted)
6. Their receipt of the times of refreshing (salvation) from the Lord.

Acts 8 – Simon the Sorcerer

It was late AD 33. “...*Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ to them...*” (8:5 NKJV). “...*When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said...*” (8:6NIV)

The miracles that Philip did provided the opening that he needed. They were not to replace the preaching of the word, but were merely the means of getting the people to listen to what he had to say – the preaching of the gospel.

After listening to the gospel, they believed the things that he said, “...concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus, both men and women were baptised...” (8:12 NKJV).

We notice here that “...they believed...”, so they had *faith* in Jesus as the Messiah. We are not told that they needed to repent. However it is inconceivable that they would believe what Philip said, and believe in Jesus as the Messiah, and then continue in the Jewish religion or in sinful practices as if nothing had happened.

They were baptised. Simon the Sorcerer also believed, and was baptised, but apparently did not repent of his past practices. He was condemned for his actions, and told to “...repent of his wickedness...” (8:22).

So, with Simon the Sorcerer we have:

1. A means of getting attention (The miracles Philip did)
2. The preaching of the gospel
3. Their conviction that they had sinned (Faith in Jesus truly being the Messiah)
4. (By implication, their repentance – as Simon was condemned for not doing it)
5. Their baptism

They received the miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of the hands of the apostles (8:17-18). It is not stated that they received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (although by implication and promise (2:38-39) they did). The two measures of the Holy Spirit should not be confused.

Acts 8 – The Eunuch

Philip was sent to the road down to Gaza in AD 33. He came across a man from Ethiopia who was reading the Scriptures, but did not understand what he was reading. This provided the opportunity that Philip needed to preach to him (8:30-31).

Philip preached to him, and explained who Jesus was (8:35). Philip must have taught him about the need to be baptised, as the Eunuch asked Philip “...what is stopping me from being baptised?...” when he saw some water (8:36).

Philip told him that the only thing that was stopping him was whether he believed in Jesus as the Christ (the Messiah) (8:37). The Eunuch confessed Jesus and was taken by Philip down into the water where he was baptised.

The Eunuch was not told to repent, but like those in Samaria it is implied that an unrepentant person could not “turn to God” – they are mutually exclusive. Likewise we are not told that he received the gift of the Holy Spirit apart from the implication from 2:38-39.

So, with the Eunuch we have:

1. A means of getting attention (Asking if he understood what he was reading)
2. The preaching of the gospel
3. (By implication, his conviction that he had sinned (Faith in Jesus truly being the Messiah))
4. (By implication, his repentance)
5. His baptism

Acts 9 - Saul

For further discussion on the conversions of the Eunuch, Saul, and Cornelius refer to Study 15 – The Holy Spirit in Conversion. You may also find it useful to use the chart comparing the three accounts of Saul’s conversion (Study 13 p.89).

Saul was on his way to round up and persecute the disciples and bring them back to Jerusalem. Jesus appeared to him on the way the Damascus. Saul did not become a christian on the road to Damascus (despite what many people teach).

Jesus said “...I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you...” (26:16 NKJV). Saul referred to this occasion when he saw the Lord as that which qualified him to be an apostle (1 Co 9:1; 1 Cor 15:8).

After seeing the Lord on the road, Saul was led to Damascus where he neither ate nor drank for three days (9:9). This is hardly the image of a man who had just become a christian. Ananias came to him, and told him what he needed to do (21:10-16). After confirming who Jesus is (Saul already knew because of the road experience), he then told him to “...*arise and be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord...*” (22:16 NKJV).

Saul was certainly repentant, and “...*immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God...*” (9:20 NKJV).

Now, Ananias told him to “...*arise and be baptised, and wash away your sins...*” Can a person be a christian without having his sins washed away? There is no question that it is the blood of Christ that washes our sins away. The real question is *at what point and exactly how do we come into contact with the blood of Christ?* Ananias said that it was when Saul submitted to Jesus in baptism.

He also told Saul to “...*call on the name of the Lord...*” That is, to appeal to His authority. Saul was not baptised just on the authority of Ananias, or because he thought it was a good idea, but “...*as the answer of a good conscience towards God...*” (1 Pet 3:21).

So, what we have in the case of Saul is:

1. A means of getting attention (Jesus appears to Saul)
2. The preaching of the gospel by Ananias, telling him what he needed to do
3. His conviction that he had sinned (Faith in Jesus truly being the Messiah)
4. (By implication, his repentance – he certainly showed it in his life and actions)
5. His baptism

Acts 10 – Cornelius

In AD 37, an angel visited a Roman Centurion living in Caesarea. He was a very religious and devout man, and was eagerly seeking to know God even though he was a Gentile. The apostle Peter was sent him.

Like the last two conversions, the Holy Spirit acted to bring the convert into contact with the preacher, rather than to tell the contact what to do.

Peter came to the house he had been sent to, and proceeded to preach the gospel to them. Cornelius had his family and his servants there to listen to what Peter had to say.

Peter said that God had revealed to him that the Gentiles are also acceptable to God, and that salvation is not just for the Jews (10:34-35). He then explained about Jesus of Nazareth, and how God had shown that Jesus was the Messiah. (10:36-38). The Jews put Jesus to death, but God raised Him up again and showed Him openly (10:39-40).

Whilst Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit fell on them and all of those who heard (10:44) in exactly the same way that it had fallen on the apostles on the day of Pentecost (11:15). This happened so as to confirm without a doubt that the Gentiles were to be brought to conversion (see notes on Study 14 – Chapter 10, p.96). This should not be confused with the indwelling measure of the Holy Spirit (2:38-39), and it is the only place where the baptism with the Holy Spirit occurs to anyone other than the apostles.

Peter then “...*commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord...*” (10:48 NKJV).

As Peter recounted the events, the rest of the apostles “...*glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”...*” (11:18 NKJV) So, we can see that these people had repented. It is also sure that they had faith in Jesus as the Messiah, as the very instruction that the angel gave to Cornelius was to listen to Peter, who was going to tell him “...*words by which he would be saved...*” (11:14). His faith was the very reason that God had sent the angel to him (10:4). To say that Cornelius would reject (not believe) the teaching that Peter delivered goes beyond the bounds of reason.

So, what we have in the case of Cornelius is:

1. A means of getting attention (The Holy Spirit brought Cornelius and Peter together)
2. The preaching of the gospel by Peter, telling them what they needed to do
3. (By implication, their faith in Jesus truly being the Messiah)
4. Their repentance
5. Their baptism

Acts 16 – Lydia

Paul, Silas and Luke came to Philippi in AD 52. There was no synagogue there, and they found some of the Jewish women who were gathered by the river. They went down and sought them out, and Paul taught them (16:13).

One of the women named Lydia listened “...and gave heed to the things spoken by Paul...” (16:14). So she believed what Paul taught (that Jesus was the Messiah). She was baptised along with other members of her household.

So, what we have in the case of Lydia is:

1. A means of getting attention (Paul goes down to the river to seek them out)
2. The preaching of the gospel by Paul, telling Lydia what she needed to do
3. Her faith in Jesus truly being the Messiah
4. (By implication, her repentance)
5. Her baptism

Acts 16 – The Jailer

Paul and Silas were thrown into prison in Philippi because they exorcised a demonic girl. They continued to sing hymns and praise God, even though they had been put in jail for doing good (and nothing wrong).

This must have made quite an impression on the jailer. At midnight, an earthquake caused the prison doors to fly open, and the stocks to become loose so that the prisoners could walk out if they wished. The jailer (fearing having lost the prisoners) was about to kill himself, but was stopped by Paul who said “...don’t do it, we are all here...” (16:28)

The jailer realised that there was something special about these men, and he had already realised that they were servants of God, and they had essentially just saved his life. He asked “...what must I do to be saved?...” (16:30 NKJV).

Paul and Silas told him that he needed to “...believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved...” (16:31 NKJV). After this, they taught him and all those who lived in his house, the word of the Lord (16:32) and the same hour of the night he and his family were baptised (16:33).

It is certainly implied that he was repentant by the approach that he made to Paul and Silas in the prison.

So, what we have in the case of the Jailer is:

1. A means of getting attention (Paul and Silas singing and praying)
2. The teaching of the gospel by Paul, telling him what he needed to do
3. His faith in Jesus truly being the Messiah
4. (By implication, his repentance – he certainly showed it in his actions)
5. His baptism

	Acts 2	Acts 3	Acts 8 <i>Simon Sorcerer</i>	Acts 8 <i>The Eunuch</i>	Acts 9 <i>Saul</i>	Acts 10 <i>Cornelius</i>	Acts 16 <i>Lydia</i>	Acts 16 <i>The Jailer</i>
The means of getting attention	The tongues of fire	The healing of the lame man	The miracles that Philip did	Do you understand what you are reading?	Jesus appears to Saul	Holy Spirit brings Peter and Cornelius together	Paul & Silas go to the river	Paul & Silas singing and praying
They heard the word of God	The preaching of Peter	The preaching of Peter	Philip preached Christ unto them	Philip preached unto him Jesus	Ananias told him what he needed to do	Peter preached to them	Paul spoke to the women	They spoke the word of the Lord to him
Their conviction of their sin and faith in Jesus as the Messiah	“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”	(implied)	They believed the things that Philip said	(Conviction implied), and faith expressed	Absolutely convinced that Jesus is the Messiah	(implied)	Lydia gave heed to the things Paul spoke	(implied –was told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ)
Their Repentance	Told to repent	(implied – they are told to do it)	(implied – Simon was condemned for not repenting)	(implied)	(implied)	(implied)	(implied)	(implied)
Their Confession of Jesus as Saviour				I believe that Jesus is the Son of God				
Their Baptism into Jesus Christ	Told to be baptised so that their sins could be forgiven	(implied – they are told to be converted)	Both men and women were baptised	And he baptised him	Arise and be baptised and wash away your sins	Commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord	She and her household were baptised	Immediately he and all his family were baptised
Their receipt of the Holy Spirit	Promised the Holy Spirit							