

Galatians 1:11-24

Seeking to convert people to Christianity is something that many of us would be uncomfortable about. This is because, I suspect, many of us have memories of being in situations in the past where visiting ministers, to use an old way of speaking, ‘preached for a verdict’. I think that such a negative reaction is appropriate because ‘conversion’ came to be understood in a particularly unfortunate way in Protestantism. The effect of this has been that the real meaning of the event that the word ‘conversion’ is meant to describe has been lost. In particular the import of what St Paul says happened to him, and the consequences of that event, has been twisted in an unfortunate way in Protestant churches. So what I want to do today is to show that what has been called Paul’s ‘conversion’ is not a religious event in the narrow way that it has been understood but is, rather, a cultural or world-shaping event. And if this is the case with Paul it is how we should understand ‘conversion’ and ‘preaching for a verdict’.

The understanding of ‘conversion’ to which we are accustomed arose when Martin Luther used his own experiences to interpret what Paul described as his ‘conversion’ experience. Before his life-changing experience of God’s grace Luther’s life was marked by periods of intense anxiety because he feared that he had not done enough to atone for his sin. That is to say he was depressed because he felt guilty and could not see how he could be forgiven. The life-changing moment for him came when he came to believe that God, through the death and resurrection of Christ, had released him from his guilt. Luther then interpreted what Paul had to say about his life-changing event as Paul being set free from sin and guilt. The consequence of this, as you well know, is that ever since Luther ‘conversion’ has been understood in terms of being set free from sin and guilt. This led to a particular way preachers slanted what they had to say. Their ‘conversion’ technique was, and perhaps still is, to make people feel anxious about being sinners and then bring Jesus in as the answer.

The trouble with this view of ‘conversion’ is that Paul never once indicated that he was laden with guilt or frustrated by attempts to win the approval of God. On the contrary Paul

stated that he was blameless in regard to his own righteousness: he said that he obeyed the Jewish religious law and was blameless before God. There is no hint in Paul's writings that he had a tortured conscience and troubled soul which Christ replaced with peace of mind and eternal security. Nor is there a hint in Paul's writings that he was changed from a life of waywardness and irresponsibility to one of moral uprightness: he definitely did not think he was like the Prodigal Son coming home from the bars and kitten clubs of a far country. These are the kind of things that have been read into what Paul says about what happened to him. But Paul's 'conversion' was not one from immorality to morality.

I think that it is also important to note that Paul's conversion did not mean a complete break with his previous life. This is how we have sometimes come to think of conversion but it is certainly not the case with St Paul. We have all heard of people repudiating their families and friends after being 'converted' But Paul does not repudiate Judaism at all. The Jews, according to Paul, remain as the chosen people of God. Nor does Paul repudiate his Jewishness. But what his conversion does mean is that Paul comes to understand that the action of Christ leads to non-Jews being incorporated into the chosen people through the establishment of a new community.

I can conclude by saying that when Paul writes about what happened to him he does not talk about what he felt - whether it was a feeling of elation or relief. Rather he talks about being made aware of a game changing public event that he saw as an act of new creation by God. This is to say that Paul's conversion leads him to speak about what God is doing in Jesus Christ. His conversion means that he becomes convinced that the death and resurrection of Christ is the beginning of a new order in the world. What Paul has to say about the concrete details of that new order as it is embodied by a new community has proved to be controversial as we shall see in coming weeks.

What St Paul's account of his so-called 'conversion' show us is that becoming a Christian is an event that does not depend on people having to admit their sin. This becoming a

Christian does not mean a person focuses on their own state of mind. Instead becoming a Christian takes us out of ourselves and leads us to catch a glimpse of a new creation and public order begun in Christ. Because this is the case conversion is a genuine act of God in a person's life. This is what I would hope can happen to us and others as we engage with the bible through worship.

Rev Ross Carter Pentecost 3, 2016