

## Say Good-bye To Converting

Perhaps an alternative title for this lesson that would help to explain what it is about would be: "salvation yes, conversion no". The beginning point for today's lesson is to establish something very basic: words have meaning. Words can create subconscious mental pictures that lead to assumptions and conclusions that we make about what we have read and heard, often without being aware of it. While I don't know what we'd do without the written word of God, on the other hand, unless one is versed in the original languages what all of us read from are translations. And all translations are, by definition, editing. In fact, most of our Bible translations aren't even taken directly from the original Hebrew or Greek to English. Depending on your Bible version it could involve a translation path that goes from the Hebrew to the Greek, then the Greek to Latin, and then the Latin to English.

In my years of researching ancient and modern writings from the great Sages to the modern academics about numerous biblical subjects and Bible characters, I have found it common for the writers (who were mostly gentile and Christian) to employ words familiar to their intended audience in whatever era and culture they lived in. And since their audiences were almost always gentile and Christian, they would use a language that I have dubbed Christian-eze.

Words and language are powerful and necessary tools for civilization to exist. They can communicate beauty and truth; but they can also communicate darkness and falsehoods. Writers inevitably write from a worldview that they personally hold, even if they're not entirely cognizant of it. Readers read from a world view that they personally hold, even if they are not entirely cognizant of it. In fact, a culture and its language are organically connected to such a high degree that there are ideas and concepts within one culture that are unique to it, and so they are not readily transferable to other cultures. Communicating those otherwise unknown cultural concepts to people outside their native culture is quite the challenge.

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. And yet a short phrase, even only a single word, have the ability to form pictures and images in our minds. For instance: I can say the word "boat", and without showing you a picture of a boat

you will each form your own mental concept of what a boat looks like. However, if when I say "boat" I'm actually referring to an Egyptian funeral barge for a Pharaoh, unless I create that particular context for you, you are more likely to think of a modern ski boat, or a yacht, or perhaps a cruise ship. Why is that? Because ski boats, yachts and cruise ships reflect the modern American and Western culture we live in. Even further, if I have created a context for you that I am indeed speaking about a funeral for a Pharaoh in 3000 B.C., and I choose to explain the scene by saying that the dead Pharaoh was transported down the Nile in the family yacht, it is going to automatically create a mental picture in your mind that is far different from the reality of what an ancient Egyptian funeral barge actually was.

It is common in Bible commentaries, Scripture study guides, pastoral sermons, and casual conversation among Christians to refer to the great New Testament Bible characters Paul, Timothy, John and others as Pastors or Ministers, teachers or Apostles; and to refer to the places of worship they met in as Churches. It is also typical to refer to the religion they practiced as Christianity and even to refer to these men and their congregation members as Christians. For a modern-day follower of Christ these words seem understandable, appropriate, and entirely representative of what we read in the New Testament. I wonder, however, what mental pictures we draw when those words are spoken or read? I would wager that the mental images of what those words mean to modern Believers does not include Jews wearing tzitzit; synagogues with a Torah Scroll at the front of the room; Jewish leadership; and the religious leaders and teachers most often speaking Hebrew or Aramaic.

Indulge me as I give you an illustration of what I'm attempting to get across and the reason for today's discussion. Not all that long ago, scattered throughout the United States were substantial communities of people who originally migrated here from the Asian Continent.

These communities were typically organized with a powerful, if not fearsome, president who was the head of the government and usually also served as the Commander in Chief of the military. Every community also acquired a trained Physician to heal people of wounds and disease and appointed a Pastor some or type of holy man who saw to the community's spiritual needs. For some of the

smaller communities and villages, it was not unusual for the Doctor to double as the Pastor as their faith was virtually inseparable from their everyday lives.

The people usually lived in caring, loving, extended families (typical for the time) and were known for putting much value in the wisdom of their elders, and for sharing what they had with one another.

Like us, these people valued their traditions. Many were farmers, others were shepherds, and a few were hunters. But they were also forward thinkers who adapted well to their local geographic and weather conditions, and were some of the earliest recorded conservationists, reflecting the greatest concern for the environment, protecting their water supply from contamination, and being careful not to overfish or overhunt. Their unique housing reflected some practical concerns that they had to deal with. Therefore, they lived in A-frame style apartments that were wider at the base than they were at the roofline. This allowed the summer rain to run off with little concern for roof leaks, and made a wintertime roof-crushing snow build-up nearly impossible. But most ingenious was that these apartment units were built using some of the lightest, yet most durable, materials known at that time; plus, they could be assembled and disassembled if need be, transported and then rebuilt reusing much of the same materials.

Does anyone know what well known group I just described to you? If you said the American Indian...the native American... then you have it right. Of course, it seems out of context, if not strange, to refer to their tribes as communities; to their Chiefs as their presidents; to their Medicine men as their physicians; and to their Tee-Pee's as A-frame apartments. The mental pictures you were drawing as I described these people don't fit who they actually were because I used words and terms from our era and culture that in no way reflected their Native American culture and had nothing to do with their society. But those words and terms I chose did make them seem more like us, or at least a people who lived more like us, had similar values as us, and generally thought like us. Yet now that you know who it was that I was describing, that seeming connection between them and us isn't there anymore, is it?

And yet, knowledgeable Bible academics, translators, pastors, and writers attach terms to the New Testament like Christian, Church, Pastor, etc., when not only are those terms not actually present in the New Testament, but to a typical Western Believer they necessarily cause us to form a mental picture of the biblical faith being described as more of a gentile faith created for a gentile society. What exists today that is called the Church is a separate and new religion founded by Constantine the Emperor of Rome in the 4th century A.D. even though in reality the Bible characters like Paul, Timothy and John were Jews, living in Jewish societies or enclaves, practicing an ancient Hebrew faith, attending Jewish synagogues, and whose members were nearly all Jews. The mental pictures that these rather standard terms paint are quite inappropriate and misleading; they distort not only what was said, but also what was meant. It also trivializes the people who lived it out and who wrote those precious letters and gospels.

But that's only the beginning of the issue of words and terms. The meaning of words changes and naturally evolves over time. The older English words used in the KJV Bible translation don't necessarily mean how we take those same English words to mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Goodness, during my lifetime there are many English words that I used in my childhood that have completely different meanings today. And there are English words that exist today that didn't exist when I was a youth.

Thus, for you who have followed Torah Class over the years, you know that one of our basic tenets is that we must try to understand what those words written in the Bible meant to the authors and to the people those authors were directing their words towards, in their era and in their ancient Middle Eastern cultural setting. This historical reconstruction is crucial in extracting proper meaning from the words we read in Scripture. If we have no interest in being open to understanding what God is really trying to tell us in His Word, then we can continue blithely along simply accepting long-held assertions that please us and that in some ways are not much better than propaganda.

Further, there are certain words in biblical Hebrew especially, which represents complex concepts that have no identifiable or close parallel in other societies and therefore those Hebrew words are difficult to express in other languages in ways

that create in our modern minds the same mental picture it created in the minds of the author and of his ancient audience. What must also be admitted is that some of those ancient Hebrew concepts have been tragically misunderstood (and at times purposefully misrepresented) and so wind up being mistranslated into English words that give us the wrong impression of their intent. The result? Doctrines that send us hurtling off in wrong directions.

There are a few Biblical words, though, that have more impact than others on our theology, doctrines and philosophy and one of those key words is the subject of our discussion: the term "conversion". Who hasn't heard the rather widespread thought of a non-Believer converting to Christianity?

The impact on our theology and Bible understanding that surrounds the word "conversion" is outsized because it applies to important things Paul supposedly said. I propose to you today that the words convert and conversion need to be retired from our vocabulary and removed from our Bibles because they aren't there in the first place. To insert those words gives us an entirely wrong impression about what it was that Paul did in reaction to his experience with Yeshua and the road to Damascus, and what he therefore expected of the disciples that he would make on behalf of Yeshua.

The traditional Christian scholarship over the past several centuries has concluded that the 1<sup>st</sup> generation Believers community during and immediately following Yeshua's day had already become a distinct religion that was separated from the biblical Hebrew faith. Basically, the idea is that Paul had found the true Messiah and then rejected something called Judaism in favor of something called Christianity, and along with it he decided to condemn as worthless servitude any attempt for new Believers (Jewish or gentile) to follow the Law of Moses that was the very heartbeat of the biblical faith. The term that was coined by later gentile Christian leaders to describe what this brilliant, highly educated Jewish Rabbi did in his extreme change from a follower of Judaism into an anti-law Christian follower of Jesus, was to "convert". Paul was a Christian convert we are told.

But what does being converted mean? A.D. Nock, Professor of religion at Cambridge in England, says that conversion means a deliberate and great change is involved, whereby the old was wrong and the new is right. And in

indeed such a definition is the crux of Christian doctrine to prove that Paul decided that his Hebrew faith that obeyed the Torah was wrong, and his membership in a new religion called Christianity (a religion that abolished the Torah of God) was right.

In the mid 1970's a courageous Bible academic who served as a professor at Harvard Divinity School named Krister Stendahl urged his fellow scholars to drop the term conversion and instead use the word "call". His contention was that the English word "call" more accurately portrays to the modern mind what was true for Paul: and it is that Paul did NOT see himself as having left his Jewishness or his Hebrew faith nor as someone who abandoned the Law and the Torah. The word "call" softened the contrast between the kind of Judaism Paul had been practicing and this new and spreading movement that made Yeshua of Nazareth the focus because Yeshua was the Messiah that the Hebrews had been waiting for. In other words, says Stendahl, for Paul, what he came to practice after his experience with Christ on the road to Damascus was a type of Judaism; not a new anti-Judaism, anti-Law, even anti-Jewish religion.

Of course, there was much push back from the traditional Christian academic and Church community that wanted there to remain even more than a sharp contrast between Torah-based Judaism and this new Christianity; but rather they insisted on maintaining a complete break between Jewishness and Christianity. Besides, says many of these academics, the words of the Bible are so mysterious (and supernatural of themselves) that the meaning of the original words continually evolve to meet whatever new meaning the passing of time and transformations of cultures might produce. So, for them, whatever those Biblical terms might have meant eons ago; or whatever the author of that Bible book might have intended in 1000 B.C., or 50 A.D., doesn't matter any longer. For these mainstream Christian academics, the TRUE meaning of the words of the Bible are whatever that meaning is for us in modern times and in modern societies using modern vocabularies and it morphs and reshapes its meaning under various circumstances. In fact, each person can have their own truth as long as they believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Not only is that position deeply troubling on its face, but it makes the Holy Scriptures into a constantly changing living document; it is ever evolving with

the only limits being the imaginations of the human mind and the circumstances of life and society. Demands of modern societies is for the Bible to support their latest wants and philosophies or they will either leave the denomination they have been a part of to find a different one that will validate their desires. Such a position necessarily holds that there is no eternal or absolute truth, no unchanging foundational principles, and thus the concept that there could be for Christians still-existing divine laws and commandments from the days of Moses is a viewpoint that only the backward and ignorant could adopt. And this thought process is essentially based on the Christian notion of conversion; a small word with a big idea; the idea being that Paul converted from a biblical Hebrew faith to Christianity. He left what was wrong and moved to what was right. He discovered that the traditional Torah-based religion of the Hebrews was incorrect and now he would follow the new Christianity that in his day had no holy book whatsoever. After all, it is historical fact that there was no such thing as a New Testament until around 200 A.D., some 150 years after Paul's time, and even then it wasn't canonized and made authoritative until late in the 300's A.D. So, if the new Christian Paul now denied the validity of the Torah and the Prophets, and there was no New Testament in his time and there wouldn't be for the better part of 2 centuries, what "Scriptures" did Paul consult? Such a line of reasoning has to admit that he would have had none...no valid holy Scriptures at all... and this again proves what a dead-end doctrine it is to claim that when Paul accepted Yeshua as His Messiah that he **converted** from Judaism to Christianity; he left one for the other.

If Paul had indeed "converted", then why does he continue going to the Temple in Jerusalem, and making sacrifices there? Why does he continue to engage in the vow rituals of first allowing one's hair to grow, and then cutting it and offering it at the Temple upon conclusion of the vow terms? Why does he continue to engage in the Biblical Feasts ordained in Leviticus? Is he merely confused? Or is he hypocritical? Or is he still evolving and moving away from his Jewishness at a measured pace?

But getting beyond Paul, how do we deal with the two groups that are routinely said to be Paul's converts: Jews who have been practicing Judaism, and Gentiles who practiced some type of pagan religion? On the surface it would certainly seem to be correct to say that Gentiles indeed made a sharp move from A to B:

from the worship of their traditional pagan gods and idols to the worship of the God of Israel. Here's the reason why the term "convert" still is inappropriate and misleading even to this situation. In Paul's worldview (which was representative of the general Jewish worldview) the world consisted of two religious communities: Israel's and everybody else's (called "the nations", *goyim*, in the Hebrew scriptures). The common biblical term used for "everybody else" is Gentile.

So, did the Jews make a distinction between Gentiles and pagan Gentiles? No, they didn't. That kind of thought is nowhere present during Paul's era. A culture or ethnicity and their god and religion were one in the same. If you are an Israelite you automatically worship the god of Israel; if you are Gentile you automatically worship some other god. End of story. Thus, in the Book of Galatians chapter 5 Paul speaks against other Believing missionaries who are telling the local Gentiles that if they receive a Jewish circumcision, then they'll be responsible to keep the "whole law" (meaning the Torah **and** the entire body of Tradition that all national Jews followed). In other words, between having a circumcision and agreeing to live a completely Jewish lifestyle, such a Gentile has converted; they have literally and legally, religiously and governmentally, changed their identity and religious affiliation from Gentile to Jew. And surprise! Paul was against this. He was against the concept of conversion. He did not want Gentiles to give up being Gentiles to become national Jews. His Gentiles were to stay Gentiles. Yes, they must stop worshipping their pagan gods and bow only to the God of Israel; but they were NOT to convert (Christianity calls what these Christian Missionaries were doing that Paul was fighting against as Judaizing). So, in Paul's mind, the only true converts were those Gentiles who became nationalized Jews as the Judaizing missionaries were insisting upon. Let me say it again: in Paul's day, whether you were from the gentile world or the Jewish world, to "convert" meant for a Jew to become a gentile or for a gentile to become a Jew. There was no middle ground and such conversion was lock, stock, and barrel. It involved not only your religion but your nationality.

You see, the problem in using the word convert or conversion is that it confuses and mischaracterizes the situation that is being described in the Bible. The term **convert** entangles us in the idea that in Paul's day a new religion called Christianity was created by Christ as something for Jewish people to change to



by leaving the biblical Hebrew faith and going to something else. In fact, most modern Bible academics acknowledge that the term Christianity did not yet exist in Paul's time and certainly is nowhere present in the New Testament.

So, if Gentiles were NOT being urged to convert and become Jews, and there was no such thing as Christianity to convert to, then what was Paul's thinking about what had happened to him on the road to Damascus and what he was asking the Gentiles he approached to do? What mental picture did he have that he was urging the Gentiles to accept and adopt? When you look at Paul's writings in Greek, he regularly uses certain derivations of the Greek word **strephe** and they all have something to do with "pointing to" or "turning to". For example, in 1Thess 1:9 we hear Paul say: "You turned to God from idols ( you **strephe** to God from idols), in order to worship the true and living God". Interestingly when the Greek got translated into Latin, the Latin word chosen was **converso**; and then when the Latin got translated into English the word chosen was convert and these two consecutive translations compounded the error.

The better and more accurate idea is that one does not convert, but rather one turns. If a Gentile converted that means he necessarily becomes a Jew electing to follow Jewish Tradition, and accepts an obligation to follow Jewish ancestral customs as part of the Jewish community. But as Paul said in 1Thess. 1, a new gentile Believer is only asked to turn from following their false god to following the true god: The God of Israel.

At the same time, Paul, in further trying to explain exactly what it is that he is asking Gentiles to do says that upon one's faith in Messiah Yeshua, the Holy Spirit enters the Believer and a kind of family connection is indeed made with the Jewish people; but it is a SPIRITUAL connection, not a physical connection. The genes of a gentile don't supernaturally transform into the genes of a Jew. And to illustrate this, when talking to gentiles Paul likes to use the Roman concept of adoption. The adopted person does NOT some gain actual physical blood or DNA connection to his or her adoptive family. Nonetheless, in a real legal way and by means of a change in state of mind this person becomes part of a new family by mutual agreement and by a voluntary change of identity. The adopted person makes a commitment to his or her new family, and in turn the family imputes full family status upon the adopted person. Further, as Paul says in Romans 8 and

Galatians 4, that upon this status change the adopted person can now cry out "Abba, Father" in worship. This "Abba, Father" isn't referring to the Hebrew Patriarch Abraham nor is it Jacob, so no physical family connection with the historical biological fathers to all Hebrews is intended. Rather this "Abba, Father" is referring to the spiritual heavenly Father, the God of Israel and of Abraham. So just as a Roman adopted person would not claim blood relationship with his new family, he does claim legal family status and equal rights based on law and on mutual agreement.

And, this was not a new concept. It is but a continuation of the beautiful story of Ruth, the Moabite woman who wanted to join her Hebrew mother-in-law's faith and family.

**CJB Ruth 1:16-17** ***<sup>16</sup> But Rut said, "Don't press me to leave you and stop following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die; and there I will be buried. May ADONAI bring terrible curses on me, and worse ones as well, if anything but death separates you and me."***

Ruth did not convert; she turned. She didn't somehow acquire Hebrew genes or cease to be a Moabite by heritage. Rather, she was essentially adopted into a new family.

Thus, this is how we need to view what happened to Paul on the Road to Damascus, and what Paul then expected of those Gentiles that he evangelized. He expected them to **turn** from their false gods to the true God. He expected them to see themselves as adopted SPIRITUALLY into the family of Hebrews, but not as flesh and blood Israelites (or in our modern vernacular, Jews). Rather their (our) new status as members of the Kingdom of God is imputed upon us by God by means of trusting in Him.

When we realize this then we can drop this concept that Paul converted from something bad to something good. That Paul left his Jewishness to become something else. Or conversely that a Gentile is to leave his or her Gentile-ness to become something else (a Jew). Whatever change there is, or is being asked, is spiritual in nature.

This also helps us to understand why the Church's insistence that if a Jew wants to worship Christ that they must "convert" is met with such stiff resistance by the Jewish community (as it should be). And this is because a Jew rightly understands that by converting the Church most certainly means that the Jew must leave his or her Jewish identity, Jewish ancestral heritage, and Torah-based cultural customs in order to become a Christian; and instead adopting the new gentile Roman Constantinian Church based customs and traditions.

Paul sums his position rather well in beginning in Romans 2:25 – Romans 3:6

**CJB Romans 2: 25-29** ***<sup>25</sup> For circumcision is indeed of value if you do what Torah says. But if you are a transgressor of Torah, your circumcision has become uncircumcision! <sup>26</sup> Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the Torah, won't his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? <sup>27</sup> Indeed, the man who is physically uncircumcised but obeys the Torah will stand as a judgment on you who have had a b'rit-milah and have Torah written out but violate it! <sup>28</sup> For the real Jew is not merely Jewish outwardly: true circumcision is not only external and physical. <sup>29</sup> On the contrary, the real Jew is one inwardly; and true circumcision is of the heart, spiritual not literal; so that his praise comes not from other people but from God.***

**CJB Romans 3: 1-6** ***Then what advantage has the Jew? What is the value of being circumcised? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! In the first place, the Jews were entrusted with the very words of God. <sup>3</sup> If some of them were unfaithful, so what? Does their faithlessness cancel God's faithfulness? <sup>4</sup> Heaven forbid! God would be true even if everyone were a liar!- as the Tanakh says, "so that you, God, may be proved right in your words and win the verdict when you are put on trial." <sup>5</sup> Now if our unrighteousness highlights God's righteousness, what should we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict his anger on us? (I am speaking here the way people commonly do.) <sup>6</sup> Heaven forbid! Else, how could God judge the world?***

I ask you to delete the term convert or conversion from your Believer's vocabulary, and instead begin to employ the term "turn" in your words and in

your thinking. Because that is closer to what Paul did and demanded of those Gentiles and Jews he took the Good News to.

Words have meaning; powerful meaning. Let's use those words correctly so that the truth can go forth and God's Kingdom can be filled with all who would call Yeshua Lord and Savior, rather than to continue to erect barriers that Yehoveh never intended.