
Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church

Andrew F. Walls

The word *conversion* has been used in Christian history in a multitude of ways. There have been at least two broad streams of usage, each with many divisions. In one stream conversion is spoken of essentially as an external act of religious change. In this usage Christian conversion refers to movement to the Christian faith, individually or collectively, on the part of people previously outside it. By extension, this usage can also indicate movement from one branch of Christian profession to another—from Catholic to Protestant, for instance, or vice versa.

In the second stream of usage, “conversion” denotes critical internal religious change in persons within the Christian community, and here the varieties of meaning raise complex issues. Sometimes “conversion” refers to subjective experience, sometimes to an assumed ontological change, sometimes to both. For centuries in the Latin West, the primary meaning of “conversion” was a person’s response to vocation to the religious or monastic life, turning from the life of the world to God. In Protestant devotion it came to refer to an early stage of the pilgrimage of the soul awakened to God. Catholics, Jansenists, mainstream Protestants, radical Protestants, Puritans, Pietists, and Arminian and Calvinist evangelicals developed differing maps of the processes of salvation and differing paradigms of “normal” Christian experience. These in turn led to different assessments of the nature and significance of conversion and of its relationship to regeneration, justification, and other elements in the salvific process. They also raised the question whether conversion was always necessary where Christian nurture had been effective. New styles of evangelism, with new understandings of the saving process, that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries complicated matters further. Whole new vocabularies of evangelism came into existence, and the word “conversion” had a place in all of them. Where the vital question is “Are you saved?” or “Have you accepted Jesus into your heart?” “conversion” is likely to mean something rather different from what it means when the question is, “How long have you been at Sinai, and what is your law work?” as it might be in the older Scottish evangelicalism, or “Have you the form of godliness, and do you desire the power thereof?” which might be raised if an inquirer sought membership of an early Methodist society.

The Protestant missionary movement complicated the understanding of conversion still further. Missions aimed to bring into the Christian faith those who were outside it, but those who were most active in establishing missions were often evangelicals, who had a well-defined paradigm of “normal” Christian experience. The evangelical conversion they had experienced had taken them from the “nominal” Christianity professed throughout the society in which they had grown up to “real” Christianity issuing in a holy life. This process was typically marked by a

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period of deep consciousness of personal sin followed by a sense of joyous liberation dawning with realization of personal forgiveness through Christ. Missionaries with this background expected to see a similar pattern of experience in those who came to Christian faith, even in societies where there had been no previous Christian profession. In this way, the distinction between the two streams of usage—the one relating to externally recognizable adherence to the Christian faith and the other relating to internal personal change—became blurred. This was not the first time that such blurring occurred. There had long been confusion within the first stream of usage when referring to such celebrated conversions as those of Constantine and Augustine, where “conversion” might be used equally of their identification (in their different ways) with the Christian community, or of the particular critical experiences that led them to it.

This essay does not attempt to disentangle these linguistic and conceptual complexities. It seeks to focus on the simplest, most elemental feature of the word “conversion,” the idea of turning. There is ample biblical warrant for this focus in the insistence with which the Scriptures of both testaments call for turning to God. One might almost say that conversion represents the specifically Christian understanding of the response to God’s saving activity. The events that best illuminate our understanding of it are described in the New Testament.

The Jewishness of the Early Church

The earliest church, as we meet it in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, was utterly Jewish. It was made up, virtually without exception, of people of Jewish birth and inheritance. They met every day in the temple (Acts 2:46), where they regularly attended “the prayers” (Acts 2:42), that is, the temple liturgy, thus congregating in a place where (beyond an outer court) none but Jews could go. Presiding over the church was James, the brother of Jesus, a man nicknamed “The Righteous” by his neighbors, who recognized that he was righteous in the Jewish sense of heartfelt obedience to the law. Whatever the differences among them in background and language—and that there were such differences, and that they had theological aspects, is clear from the record—they all saw Jesus and his work from the perspective of Israel’s history, hopes, and expectations. Their priorities and concerns are thoroughly Jewish: as the disillusioned disciple on the way to Emmaus says, they had seen Jesus as the one who would set Israel free (Luke 24:21). On the mount of ascension the preoccupation is the same. Realizing that they are standing at the threshold of a new era, the disciples ask the Lord if he is now about to give the kingdom back to Israel (Acts 1:6). They cannot conceive of Jesus’ saving work without its political climax in the history of Israel because, in Jewish terms, salvation is unintelligible without the salvation of the nation. Nor does Jesus deny this idea or tell them they have misunderstood his mission; he simply tells them that the times and seasons are in the Father’s hands (Acts 1:7).

There were, of course, things that marked out the company of Jesus believers from all other varieties of observant Jew. What outsiders would probably notice first was a distinctive lifestyle

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among these Jesus people. They shared property, making special provision for vulnerable sectors of the community such as widows. And they had frequent communal meals, eating in one another's houses (Acts 2:44–46). In the sphere of belief, their most distinctive feature was their identification of three key figures in the Scriptures of Israel—the Davidic Messiah who was the national savior, the Son of Man who would figure in the judgment of the world, and the Suffering Servant who sacrificed himself for his people—with the recent prophet and teacher Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was universally known to have been put to death by the Romans, but the community vigorously asserted that he had risen from the dead.

None of these things, however, meant that these people had taken on a new religion. Rather, these beliefs gave them deep insight into, and deeper understanding of, the religion they had always had. They did not even know that they were Christians; the word had not yet been coined (Acts 11:26). They needed no special name; they were Israel. They had no less reverence for the Torah than before, but more; they remembered that Jesus had said that not the smallest letter of the law would be lost by his agency. They had not less reverence for the temple, but more, for they remembered how Jesus had cleansed it and called it his Father's house, recalling the old scripture about the zeal of God's house consuming his chosen one (John 2:17). They saw no reason to cease animal sacrifices; in the light of the Suffering Servant's self-offering, they understood them better. Their favorite title for Jesus, Messiah, was steeped in the history of Israel and in convictions about Israel's destiny. Jesus made sense of Jewish history; everything about him made sense in Jewish terms.

This did not mean, however, that the Jesus community accepted the life of the Israel of that day. On the contrary, their preaching, as it is described in Acts, carries the note of crisis, a repeated call for decision. A new age had arrived; it was time for Israel to turn from the old ways (Acts 2:28–30).

This note of crisis, focused on the call to turn, was not new. It was one of the dominating themes of the Scriptures of Israel. The root *shubh* occurs in the Hebrew Bible no less than 750 times with the sense of turning, or (in a causative form, with God as agent) in the sense of being turned, brought back, or restored. These uses are especially characteristic of the prophetic Scriptures. These often show Israel worshiping gods other than Yahweh, setting up a society marked by opulence, extortion, injustice, and oppression of the poor, giving Israel's God a bad name among foreign nations (Isa. 2:6–18; 5:6–13, Ezek. 36:22). The consequences are defeat, occupation, and exile (Isa. 1:1–9). But the same Scriptures use that same language of turning to show a process whereby God "turns the nation back" and restores it, rescuing the defeated nation, bringing back the exiles, and receiving the praise of a righteous, redeemed people (Isa. 51:11). Indeed, even when apostasy is rife, there is a "righteous remnant" that is the nucleus of the true Israel (Isa. 8:16–18; 10:20–22). The Messiah, the personal agent of God in restoring Israel, reigns forever over the restored nation with a rule that is unfailingly just and equitable (Isa. 11:1–5). Moral renewal follows inner transformation: people will adhere to God from their hearts (Jer. 31:31–34). And this change will herald universal renewal, in which the flora and fauna and the whole environment are enriched and violence is unknown, and the Gentiles will acknowledge Yahweh as their own God (Isa. 11:6–9). The messianic age will bless the whole world. The recurrent call of the prophets is for Israel to turn to face the age to come; that is, the call to conversion.

Such is the framework within which that earliest church did its thinking. We see the framework even in the Synoptic Gospels.

The focus of the Messiah's work is the renewal of Israel. (The angel tells Joseph to name the child Jesus because he will save his people—that is, Israel—from their sins, Matt. 1:21.) The story of the ministry of Jesus has as a preface an account of John the Baptist—indeed, Mark even calls John's ministry "the beginning of the Gospel" (Mark 1:1). The ministry of John, like that of the earlier prophets, is a call for turning—for conversion. He calls for radical change of mind ("repentance") in the light of the establishment of God's personal rule ("the kingdom of God," see Matt. 3:1–11). And the change of mind is symbolized in the rite that gave "John the Dipper" his nickname. Almost certainly John did not invent baptism. Something like it was already in use as a purification rite at the initiation of Gentiles who wished to enter

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Israel. It was a symbolic washing away of the filth of the heathen world. John's revolution was to require the baptism of Jews; the covenant people, according to the preaching of John, needed cleansing as much as did any idolatrous Gentile. Jews who sought John's baptism implicitly recognized their moral equivalence with Gentile outsiders.

The early chapters of Acts depict a community whose original members would have received John's baptism, and whose whole education prepared them for the arrival of the messianic age, and with it the restoration and renewal of Israel. The community proclaims the arrival of the Messiah, and those who so recognize Jesus accept baptism, thus acknowledging their need for change of mind, and "receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38–39). In the prophetic writings the Spirit of God indicates a divine activity particularly marking the messianic age (Joel 2:28–32). Believers undergo a radical change of lifestyle; they share their property, share their meals, and give careful attention to marginalized people (Acts 2:43–45; 4:32–35; 6:1–4). In doing so, they turn away from the exploitative ways so often characteristic of the life of Israel, the things that the prophets had denounced. This is the messianic community, the community that has morally turned, a righteous community. Here is the evidence that the restoration of Israel has begun. Jesus is saving his people Israel, heirs of the prophetic promises and of the covenant, from their sins (Acts 3:24–26).

This church is completely Jewish in composition and thinking, Jewish at the very roots of its identity. There is no sign of their going into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature. The few people who joined the community from outside Israel—the family of Cornelius, the Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch—came, not through some evangelistic policy, but through what one might call divine or providential nudges; and all, even if not accepted as Israelites, were already worshipers of Israel's God. In the church of the early chapters of Acts, the traditional institutions of Israel—Torah, temple, sacrificial cultus—keep their ancient place. That church made a profound impact on its society, so that many thousands of zealous Torah-keeping Jews came forward to share in the messianic restoration of Israel and share in the times of refreshing that the restoration brings (Acts 3:19–20). But even as servants of Messiah Jesus, they were still zealous for the Torah (Acts 21:20).

This is Jewish life and Jewish thought—but it is Jewish life

and thought converted. It is life lived, and thinking done, in terms of the messianic age, long spoken of as the Age to Come, and now arrived: inaugurated by the Messiah, just as the prophets had said would happen. This is Jewish life and thought turned toward Messiah Jesus.

Disruption and Change

Left to themselves, the earliest church members might have continued to demonstrate the messianic renewal and restoration of Israel, sharing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, breaking social bread together, and attending the temple liturgy (Acts 2:42) until Jerusalem fell about their ears. But they were not left to themselves. What happened was no part of deliberate church strategy, and the people responsible for it were not apostles or leading figures in the church. We do not even know their names. Nevertheless the events mark a turning point in Christian history. It seems to have begun with Stephen's explosive preaching and the disturbance that followed it and led to his death. Many believers were forced out of Jerusalem; it would be natural for them to seek shelter in the Jewish communities beyond Israel (Acts 6:8–8:1). Most of them did what they had done in Jerusalem and proclaimed Jesus as Messiah in the Jewish communities (Acts 11:19). But some people (it is remarked that they were of Cypriot and Libyan background), arriving in the cosmopolitan city of Antioch, began to talk about Jesus to "Greeks"—that is, to pagans (Acts 11:20).

This meant talking about Jesus in a new way. There was little to be gained by stressing the ethnic term "Messiah." It could be translated into Greek easily enough, but the translation ("the Smear One") would still seem odd to anyone not well acquainted with Jewish institutions. Explaining it would require a lengthy introduction to the Scriptures; and supposing there were Greek pagans with the interest and stamina to pay attention, they might still be puzzled to see any relevance to their own situation. Why should they rejoice that the national savior of Israel had arrived? What sort of good news to them was the restoration of Israel?

The believers from Cyprus and Cyrene, although for them personally the messiahship of Jesus must have seemed the key to the Gospel, took a different route. Linguistic translation was not enough; conceptual translation was necessary in order to convey the fact that Jesus had ultimate significance for Greek pagans, just as he had for devout Jews. They presented Jesus as Lord, *Kyrios*. It was a word that Jews could use readily enough of the Messiah; Peter speaks to a Jewish audience of Jesus being made "both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36). But the believers must have known that in Antioch "Lord" was the title of cult divinities like Sarapis. And perhaps by this means Greek pagans could get their first inkling of who Jesus is by hearing of him as the divine lord, *Kyrios Iesus*, just as other devotees addressed *Kyrios Sarapis*.

This piece of cross-cultural communication was soon reinforced by a decision of permanent significance for the Christian faith. As people of Greek and pagan background responded to this presentation of Jesus in Antioch and far beyond it (for Antioch, rather than Jerusalem, turned out to be the missionary church), the status of those who responded had to be considered. And at the so-called Apostolic Council described in Acts 15, the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, themselves pious, law-keeping people under the presidency of James, the outstandingly law-righteous brother of the Lord, agreed that followers of Jesus the Messiah, even if not ethnic Jews, had indeed entered Israel. They did not need the traditional signs of Jewish religious culture, circumcision and Torah-keeping.

To explore the significance of the decision, we should remember Israel's long missionary tradition whereby Gentile proselytes had been welcomed to the fold of Israel. Rabbinic literature compared them to stags, whose natural habitat was in the wild, grazing with sheep of the flock. Synagogues in the dispersion often had numbers of such people, and the later chapters of Acts suggest that they were fertile soil for the preaching of Paul and other missionaries (Acts 13:48; 17:4). Israel had long known of people like David's Moabite ancestor Ruth, who declared that their people would be Israel, and their God Israel's God (Ruth 1:16). But a Gentile male needed to undergo circumcision, receiving the mark of the covenant with God, as the sign of adoption into Israel. Later the further requirement of baptism gave additional solemnity to the transition of the proselyte from the heathen world of the nations to the life of the Nation.

Furthermore, several passages in the prophetic writings indicated that the messianic age would see floods of Gentiles seeking the God of Israel. Thus in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 many peoples will decide to go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. In Zechariah ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the edge of his robe and go with him because they have heard that God is with him (Zech. 8:23). So as Jerusalem believers listened to the reports of the missionaries of the Antiochene church, they would receive a yet higher sense of confirmation that the promised messianic age had arrived. But these same Scriptures talked of the word of the Lord going out from Zion (Isa. 2:3) and of "the mountain of the Lord's house," that is, the hill on which the temple stood, being established as the principal mountain (Isa. 2:2). Perhaps it is not surprising that many Jerusalem believers took it for granted that the believing Greeks in Antioch and beyond should be treated as enlightened Gentiles had always been treated in Israel. They were proselytes, stags that had chosen to graze with the sheep. In addition to the baptism they had received (and there was in any case an established custom of baptizing proselytes), they should be circumcised and, being thus incorporated into Israel, keep the Torah as good Israelites. After all, the Torah was Israel's most precious possession, given by God himself and marking Israel out from other nations—should not all followers of Israel's Messiah keep and cherish it? And what greater gift or blessing could these newly adopted Israelites receive? If circumcision was the mark of the covenant, should not those newly brought within the covenant carry that mark? The only way of life known to the earliest believers in Jesus—the only known Christian lifestyle, to use an anachronism—was that of pious, observant Jews. It was the way of life sanctified by the Messiah himself, maintained by his closest disciples (Peter had never eaten anything common or unclean), and outstandingly patterned by the brother who had grown up in the same home as the Messiah.

It is not surprising that many Jerusalem believers evidently thought on these lines. Nor is it too surprising that numbers of new Gentile believers were ready to go along with the argument. Some of them had doubtless attended the synagogue for many years, convinced that Israel's God was indeed God, keeping, perhaps, such parts of the Torah as they could manage, but holding back from the irrevocable step of circumcision. Now that they knew Jesus Messiah, might this be the time to take on the whole yoke of God?

The opening of the Epistle to the Galatians, the source that reveals that some Gentile believers found the argument for Torah and circumcision attractive, also reveals Paul's reaction to it. It is not just disagreement—it is white-hot indignation. His emotions

are so strong as to strain his syntax, and his language becomes so robust that some English versions translate rather coyly. Paul will not allow it even as an option for people brought up as Hellenistic pagans to adopt, on coming to Christ, the lifestyle of very good, devout, observant Jewish believers. *The followers of Jesus are not proselytes. They are converts.*

This was no unilateral decision of Paul's, though it is he who builds on it a whole understanding of Christian justification, first in Galatians and later in Romans. We are assured in Acts 15 that it reflected the mature decision of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, and the specific advice of James and of Peter. It marked the church's first critical departure from Jewish tradition and experience. It built cultural diversity into the church forever. What is more, it gave rise to situations that were open-ended and unpredictable.

The Significance of the Convert Model

One way of assessing the significance of the decision of the Jerusalem council that Gentile converts did not, like proselytes, need Torah and circumcision is to consider what the implications of the opposite decision would have been; that is, if the council had decided to retain the long-standing proselyte model and require the new believers to live under the same regime as the original believers in Jesus. It is safe to say that huge areas of Hellenistic social, family, and intellectual life would have been left untouched by Christian faith. Whole stretches of Paul's letters would have been unnecessary. Consider, for instance, the passage in which Paul discusses what a Christian should do if invited to dinner by a pagan friend who may have bought the meat from a temple where it had been offered in pagan sacrifice (1 Cor. 10:27–30). This was an entirely new problem for believers. No apostle or elder, however experienced, had had to face it, because they were all observant Jews, and everyone knew that observant Jews did not sit at pagan dinner tables. Had Corinthian believers become proselytes and adopted the Jerusalem church lifestyle, there would have been no problem; the invitation would not be extended, or would be refused if it were. But Paul envisages a new sort of Christian lifestyle, where believers do

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join pagans at the dinner table and have to face the implications of acting, thinking, and speaking as Christians in that situation, speaking of Christ, perhaps at a pagan friend's table. He envisages Hellenistic Christians operating within Hellenistic social and family life, challenging and disturbing it, bringing about radical change in it—but from the inside, as a result of Christians expressing the implications of their faith within that society's institutions. Yes, he says in effect, go to dinner with your pagan friend if you want to, but be clear in your mind, and be ready to make clear to people present, the Christian grounds on which you are eating or not taking the meat.

This advice is part of a whole discourse on how Christians should act within the institutions of Hellenistic society (1 Cor. 8:1–11:1). It shows a whole new Jesus lifestyle, a Hellenistic way of being Christian, in process of construction, and we can view much of Paul's correspondence as being essentially about the

principles involved in that process. This was necessary because the council of Acts 15 had made it clear that the new believers were not Jewish proselytes, but Greek converts. It was their calling to open up the ways of thinking, speaking, and acting characteristic of Hellenistic society in the Roman East Mediterranean to the influence of Christ. Those ways needed to be turned to him—converted, in fact—until he was enfleshed there, as securely at home in the Hellenistic East Mediterranean as he had been in Jewish Palestine. Paul speaks of himself as being in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed among the Galatian believers (Gal. 4:19). And Christ could not be formed among them all the time they insisted on patterning themselves on Jewish believers, even exemplary Jewish believers. A Galatian

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Christ must be formed among Galatian Christians if Galatia was to meet the Christ of God. Is it significant that Paul's tone is harsher with the Galatians, who were, with excellent motives, rejecting the call to a converted Hellenistic lifestyle, than it is with the Corinthians, who were making a mess of constructing one?

In that converted lifestyle every aspect of Hellenistic life and all its institutions must be turned toward Christ. And there were no precedents; the guideposts familiar to early believers were there no longer. At the Jerusalem council no one could have been certain what the converted Hellenistic lifestyle, without the framework of the Torah, would be like—except that it must recall the Christ who walked in Palestine and reflect the activity of the Holy Spirit. Christ would be made flesh once more, made manifest where he had not walked in flesh before, as he was received by faith in Hellenistic society.

Hellenistic social and family life created new situations for believers in Jesus and required Christian choices to be made on a daily basis. The choices were of a different order from those facing dispersion Jews in their cultural adjustment to the Hellenistic world, even though Jews and Christians had so many attitudes in common. Greek-speaking Jews were negotiating someone else's culture while retaining their identity; Greek Christians were negotiating their own culture while expressing a Christian identity. Not only were new social situations constantly arising; an intellectual environment that combined the influences of Greek philosophy, Roman law, Eastern mysticism and spirituality, and astral science was giving rise to questions that no believers had found it necessary to ask before. That intellectual environment was the highway to a great outworking of creative theological activity, but it must have often seemed to old-style Jewish believers to be dangerous, uncharted territory. Had the Jesus community retained the proselyte model, Christians would almost inevitably have been taken out of the intellectual mainstream and shut up to their own sacred books. But as converts, believers in Jesus were required to turn their processes of thought toward Christ, to think Christ into the intellectual framework of their time and place. The eventual result was Christian theology as we know it.

The outcome of conversion was thus culturally and intellectually dynamic, creative, and innovative. As segments of Hellenistic social reality and structures of Hellenistic thought were turned toward Christ, they received new life and meaning. The

general effect of the proselyte lifestyle would almost certainly have been to draw the new believers' energies in another direction. It might have produced very devout Christians, but their effect on their society and its ways of thinking would have been negligible.

On many occasions since Galatians was written, good Christian people have tried to ensure that those they have brought to faith would become as much like themselves as possible; have the same priorities and avoidances, hold the same things important, take the Torah and circumcision of those who evangelized them. And it *is* safer. If any conservative-minded Jerusalem believers read 1 Corinthians, they would no doubt have found all their fears about the decision of the Apostolic Council confirmed and would be doubly sure of the folly of leaving raw believers, newly brought out of paganism, without the guidance of the Torah. The way of proselytes is safe. They give up their old customs and beliefs and take up those of someone else. There is a sacrifice involved—they give up their national heritage and social affiliations. But once this is done, the guideposts are clear; there is a precedent for every eventuality, every situation has been met before.

Converts face a much riskier life. Converts have to be constantly, relentlessly turning their ways of thinking, their education and training, their ways of working and doing things, toward Christ. They must think Christ into the patterns of thought they have inherited, into their networks of relationship and their processes for making decisions. And new issues, cultural or intellectual, where it is necessary to make a Christian choice, are arising all the time and with no exact parallels in the past. Proselytes may walk by sight; converts have to walk by faith.

The distinction between proselyte and convert is vital to Christian mission. It springs out of the very origins of that mission, demonstrated in the first great crisis of the early church. The later church has seen many heresies come and go, but the earliest of them has been by far the most persistent. The essence of the "Judaizing" tendency is the insistence on imposing our own religious culture, our own Torah and circumcision. Christian conversion as demonstrated in the New Testament is not about substituting something new for something old—that is to move back to the proselyte model, which the apostolic church could have adopted but decided to abandon. Perhaps they remembered the word of the Lord—his only recorded utterance on the subject of proselytes—that proselytes, won by infinite pains, readily become children of hell (Matt. 23:15). Nor is conversion a case of adding something new to what is already there, a new set of beliefs and values to supplement and refine those already in place. Conversion requires something much more radical. It is less about content than about *direction*. It involves turning the whole personality with its social, cultural, and religious inheritance toward Christ, opening it up to him. It is about turning *what is already there*.

Christ is formed among the elements of the preconversion life as he is received by faith there. And as the Gospel crosses cultural frontiers, many things, as the apostles and elders at Jerusalem realized, are open-ended and unpredictable. The realization would be unbearable but for one thing: the knowledge that new believers receive the Holy Spirit. In the Acts 15 account, it was the fact that God, who knows the heart, had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as well as to the apostolic company; that reality clinched the matter for Peter (Acts 15:8). The Hellenistic way of Christian living would be constructed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In a very profound sense conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit in the church.