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BIB 363 Acts NZ/NLS

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Traditionally, Christianity has understood Acts 9 as the story of Paul's conversion to Christianity. There are some problems with this reading that we will discuss in class, after this assignment. In one page, answer the question, did Paul convert? "Yes" and "No" are not good enough answers. I need you to argue for your opinion. To argue your point, you must answer the following questions:

Define "Conversion." Not in your own words, but from a dictionary. Apply your definition to Acts 9 and show whether the definition fits the text.

According to two slightly different versions of the Oxford English Dictionary conversion is defined in accordance to the subject or context. In the broader sense conversion is defined as a *change or the process of changing or causing something to change from one form to another* (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary and Oxford Dictionary of English). However, as it relates to theology, each one defines it as follows:

Conversion: **2.** the fact of changing one's religion or beliefs or the action of persuading someone else to change theirs: *he insists that real conversion is a matter of the heart* | [count noun]: *his passion for seventeenth-century literature had led the former atheist to a sudden conversion.* ■ (Christian Theology) repentance and change to a godly life: *the individual's responsibility in conversion is to repent and believe.* (Oxford Dictionary of English).

Conversion: Change in character, nature, etc. **1.** Theology. The turning of sinners to God; a change from sinfulness to righteousness. (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)

One challenge with relying on a modern dictionary in any language to define *conversion* is that a current culture's concept, understanding and perspective is inherent in the definition. In both dictionaries, the broader definition is one of change, however, both continue to define the word in contextually (i.e. law, biology, theology, etc.). In the book of Acts, the Greek word for conversion, **epistrophé: a turning about, conversion** **Original Word: ἐπιστροφή, ἤς, ἡ** (Gentiles turning from idolatry to the true God) is only found in Acts 15:3 in reference to Paul and Barnabus reporting on the *conversion* of the Gentiles before the elders in Jerusalem (<https://biblehub.com/greek/1995.htm>). The word conversion as defined by the above-mentioned dictionaries is not found.

With that said, I do not believe that Paul *converted* as we have been taught in our modern church traditions. Acts 9 does not attest or indicate that after Paul's encounter with Jesus, he renounced all things *Jewish* and founded a new religion or Jewish sect. Rather, Paul became a witness to the resurrected Jesus and could now affirm that Jesus is the Messiah. I do believe that Paul *converted*, in the broader sense of having changed. It is clear, after his experience on the Damascus Road, he was no longer Paul the assassin (as we would define it today), but Paul "the chosen vessel" of Jesus to bear His Name to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Paul, defender of the Law and tradition now embraces The Way, which is not as much a change in belief, but a direct divine insight into God's plan for humanity. The idea of Christians as followers of Christ was not used until much later in Antioch and was a pejorative term.

Further, although Paul still continues the praxis of Judaism, the word *conversion* is intentionally used to account for Paul's new direction. The new direction encompasses the

idea that Paul is no longer the same person, Paul still “seeks the God of Israel” but now “views this God as working through the promise of Jesus” and it is imperative that the Jewish people also respond to Jesus as Messiah (Baker 349). Moreover, significance is placed upon Paul’s *conversion* in the traditional sense because it is related (with varying details) three times in the Book of Acts (Baker 350).

Moreover, Harold Marshall contends that the fact of Paul’s conversion is “not in any doubt” (176). Citing Paul’s description of his Damascus Road experience and being called by Jesus as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:8, Galatians 1:12-17 and Philippians 3:4-7, Marshall’s avers that Paul, himself is referring to his conversion (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 176).

In summary, Paul changed in the broader sense of conversion, but not he did not change his Jewish traditions or practices, nor did he become a founder of a new religion. However, he did change is understanding of the Messiah, he became a witness to the reason Messiah and the Messiah’s messenger of universal reconciliation to humanity.