

THE CLARITY OF CONVERSION: ENABLING TRANSFORMATIONAL CONVERSION IN GERMANY

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Abstract

Transformational conversion has been essential to the cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity. An introduction to conversion and diffusion in the New Testament reveals relevant biblical themes to ensure an intelligible communication of conversion from an evangelical viewpoint. Conversion requires a two-fold movement of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. As a supernatural act of God, people respond to the verbal transmission of the gospel with a personal decision of faith. The biblical data supplies that conversions may involve deliberation processes and cannot be separated from a life-long commitment to Christian discipleship. A multi-case study of three church plants in Germany confirms that clear invitations into discipleship are necessary for facilitating transformational conversion. Each church presented conversion intelligibly, provided decision-making opportunities, affirmed the point and process of conversion, and connected conversion with discipleship.

Keywords: transformational conversion, diffusion, discipleship.

Transformational conversion has been vital to the cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity throughout history.¹ Paul G. Hiebert, well-known for bringing anthropological insights into the study of missions, emphatically states that conversion must move beyond a change of behavior and belief to a transformation of worldview.² A multi-case study of three evangelical church plants in Germany disclosed that a clear understanding of conversion that integrated an explicit call to spiritual growth was foundational for transformational conversion.³ The missionary activities of these churches are salient expressions of their correlating evangelical movements: Hope Center in Berlin (HCB), an independent Pentecostal church led by a second-generation

¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, Kindle (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 66-68.

² Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 11-12, 308-316. On pages 25-26, Hiebert defines worldview as “the cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives.”

³ Liesen Frank, “Conversion in Germany: An Analysis of Patterns of Diffusion in Evangelical Church Planting (2010-2020),” (PhD diss., Fort Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021), 241-251.

Ghanian migrant, represents the growing influence of migrant missions in Germany. ConnectKirche Erfurt (CKE), which belongs to Germany's largest Pentecostal denomination, is a typical new Pentecostal church with modern forms of worship. Gospel Church Munich (GCM) is one example of American mission efforts operating within the globally active Redeemer City-to-City church planting network. Their faith expressions represent part of the new mosaic of lived Christianity in post-Christian Europe.⁴ First, an introduction to conversion and diffusion in the New Testament discloses relevant biblical themes to ensure an intelligible communication of conversion from an evangelical viewpoint. Second, a review of diffusional themes across the cases-study churches reveals that clear invitations into discipleship are necessary for facilitating transformational conversion.⁵

Conversion and Diffusion in the New Testament

The following section offers a biblical understanding of conversion and correlating diffusional themes. A summary of the basic elements of conversion in the New Testament precedes an explanation of the order of salvation, conversion as point or process, and conversion in relation to transmission and transformation. Various biblical findings and theological considerations reveal salient points of interest that bear on the praxis of conversion and diffusion in the case study churches.

The Two Basic Components of Conversion

The biblical terms for conversion reveal that conversion consists of the two basic movements of turning away from sin through repentance and turning to God by faith. In the Old Testament, the two Hebrew terms *nacham* and *shuv* denote repentance. *Nacham* can mean to "lament" as an emotion of compassion for others. When *nacham* refers to repentance, it is an emotional response to one's personal character or conduct and more frequently applies to God than to man. In Genesis 6:6-7, "the LORD *regretted* that He had made man on earth." *Shuv* is the most common term for human repentance. The prophets often applied this term to urge Israel to return to God. The term emphasizes a moral separation from sin and entry into fellowship with

⁴ Liesen, "Conversion in Germany," 40-78, 284-285.

⁵ In this article, the term diffusion refers to the entire process of transmitting and translating the Christian message, resulting in the turnaround and transformation of various peoples and cultures as well as the retransmission of the gospel. Walls applies the term diffusion to the cross-cultural transmission and appropriation of the Christian message. Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 2, 10, 30, 34. The term pertains to the dynamics of gospel diffusion from Christian sub-cultures into their local, secular contexts in the case study analysis.

God. God promises in 2 Chronicles 7:14 that when “My people . . . pray and seek My face, and *turn from* their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land.”⁶

In the New Testament, three main Greek words denote repentance. The most common term is *metanoeo*. Jesus began his ministry with a call to repentance and ended his ministry by commissioning his disciples to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations (Mt 4:17, Lk 24:46-47). The apostle Paul affirmed the universal need for repentance when he told his Gentile audience in view of God’s judgment that “God now commands all people everywhere to *repent*” (Acts 17:30). *Metanoeo* describes a change of mind, which comprises a genuine regret for past sins and a commitment to a changed life. Berkhof points out that *metanoeo* entailed an intellectual component of accepting God’s truth in salvation (2 Tm 2:25), a volitional component to turn from self to God consciously (Acts 8:22), and an emotional component of godly sorrow over personal sin (2 Cor 7:10).⁷

Second in importance to *metanoeo* is the term *epistrepho*, which describes a *turning again* or *turning back*, putting greater emphasis on returning into a relationship with God. Thus, the apostle Peter urges his listeners in Acts 3:19 to “repent and *turn back*, so that your sins may be wiped out.” The final term in the NT is *metameleia*, which may or may not indicate true repentance and translates to *change your mind* or *regret*. *Metameleia* highlights the emotional more than the volitional component of repentance (Mt 21:29, 32, 2 Cor 7:10).⁸ Prolific, evangelical author and theologian Millard Erickson points out that the frequent use of the concept of repentance in various cultural settings in the New Testament testifies to the universal importance of repentance as a critical aspect of conversion, thereby counteracting a cheap grace approach of making disciples.⁹ Congruently, John Stott laments that despite the frequent call to repentance by Jesus and the apostles, the concept of turning away from sin is often absent in evangelism for the sake of decisionism. Instead, evangelism needs to “spell out in realistic and concrete terms” the consequences of repentance.¹⁰

Whereas repentance is the negative side of conversion by turning away from sin, placing one’s faith in Christ for salvation is the positive side. Faith plays a critical role in the concept of Christian salvation since by faith, the believer receives justification from sin, which establishes a righteous standing before God.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1989), 933, 935-936.

⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 480-481.

⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 482. Eckhard Schnabel explains that in the NT, the imminence of God’s judgment and the coming of God’s kingdom induce repentance. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 227.

⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 937-938.

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, upd. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 92.

In the NT, the Greek verb *pisteo* contains two essential aspects of genuine faith. In one sense, faith simply affirms truth. Heb 11:6 sets the baseline of faith by stating that “the one who draws near to Him must *believe* that He exists.” In another sense, *pisteo* moves beyond an affirmation of truth to denote a personal trust in Christ for salvation. Jn 3:16 states that “everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life” (also Jn 1:12, 3:18). Faith that leads to salvation both affirms Christian teachings as truth and relies on the saving work of Christ. Similar to the concept of repentance, Berkhof explains that faith has an intellectual element of positively recognizing the truth of God’s Word, an emotional element of deeply sensing the need for Christ, and a volitional element of personal trust in Christ as Savior and Lord.¹¹ New Testament scholar Leon Morris depicts faith in Paul’s writings as a “warm personal trust in a living Saviour” and a “transforming attitude,” encapsulating the entire Christian life as a life of faith.¹² Thus, individuals receive salvation by placing their faith in Christ and continue in a life-long, transformational process of personal faith called sanctification (Eph 2:8-10, Ro 5:1-2).

Conversion and the Order of Salvation

Since the Reformation, theologians have set the various aspects of soteriology more deliberately in a logical and interrelated order, commonly called *order salutis*. Since the Bible does not provide a specific order of salvation, a considerable variety of viewpoints exists among theological traditions and across various denominations. The contrasting views are most explicit when comparing the Reformed and Arminian approaches to the order of salvation, the former influential in Tim Keller’s church planting network City to City, the latter within the Methodist tradition as well as the Pentecostal and charismatic movements.

The Reformed view begins with regeneration, making God the sole and decisive author of genuine conversion. Conversion follows as the human response to God’s saving act, only possible through God’s prior, effectual calling of the sinner. Conversion, which consists of repentance and faith, naturally leads to the explanation of justification by faith, the adoption of the believer as God’s child, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. As the believer enjoys a new relationship with God through adoption, sanctification continues the process of continual change into Christlikeness after conversion. Finally, the Holy Spirit ensures the perseverance and glorification of the believer.

In contrast, the Arminian view emphasizes the ability of man to make a free choice in conversion. God graciously enables man to respond to the call of conversion, but man has the

¹¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 503-06. Similarly, Erickson argues that *pisteo* must entail the affirmation of truth and personal trust. He adds that faith does not contradict but harmonizes with reason and knowledge. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 939-941.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 263.

ability to choose or deny that offer. Regeneration follows the human decision in conversion. Respectively, man's responsibility rather than God's sovereign work is the critical factor in the processes of sanctification and the perseverance of the saints.¹³ Independent of this controversy, the apostle Paul considered conversion a supernatural work of God, revealing it as a "demonstration of the Spirit and power" (1 Cor 2:4-5, 1 Thes 1:5).¹⁴

Although the doctrinal differences between denominations are less accentuated in present-day evangelicalism, the query occurs whether the divergent emphases of God's sovereignty and human will in the order of salvation result in differing missional practices.¹⁵ Do churches within the Arminian tradition seek to influence the human will in conversion and sanctification more urgently? Do they use emotional appeals more readily with the potential of human manipulation? In contrast, do Reformed leaders remain too passive in appeals to conversion by only trusting in God's sovereignty? Do they repress human emotion and rely exclusively on cognitive persuasion?

Conversion as Process or Point

Richard Peace argues that the slow conversion process of Jesus' apostles in the gospel of Mark and the crisis experience of Paul's conversion are similar in that they begin with an insight into Christ and self, a turning from sin to Jesus, and a transformation through forgiveness and discipleship (Acts 9:1-19). Peace concludes that they supply two basic, biblical models of instantaneous and gradual Christian conversion. Although theologians debate whether the use of Paul's conversion as a model is tenable, Peace demonstrates that the biblical testimony affirms gradual processes of conversion.¹⁶ John Stott reasons convincingly that conversion may be

¹³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 491; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 932-933. Berkhof represents the Reformed view and begins with effectual calling that results in regeneration, followed by conversion. Erickson takes the position that the effectual call leads to conversion, thus producing regeneration. Both authors clarify that this is not a temporal but rather logical sequence. Erickson offers an insightful discussion of predestination and its relation to regeneration and conversion on pages 908-928.

¹⁴ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 227, 227-228.

¹⁵ "An Assemblies of God Response to Reformed Theology [Position Paper]," Assemblies of God, accessed October 14, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2B8UYKq>.

¹⁶ Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 279-81. Gordon Smith criticizes Peace for using Paul as model for conversion since Paul's conversion might also have been more gradual. Typically, conversions are protracted experiences. Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion & Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 31, 126-29. Similarly, Scot McKnight opposes the use of Paul's conversion as a model to make way for accepting conversion approaches across ecclesial traditions. Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 23, 1-25.

instantaneous, yet “the Holy Spirit is a gentle Spirit; he often takes time to turn people around from self-absorption to Christ.”¹⁷

Berkhof and Erickson agree that conversion may be gradual in the experience of the convert. However, regeneration, the supernatural work of God in conversion that takes place subconsciously, has a finite beginning and marks a definite starting point of the Christian life. Conversion is “rooted in the work of regeneration.”¹⁸ Eckhard Schnabel confirms this understanding of a finite beginning of the Christian life in Paul’s missionary preaching, who presumed that believers had gone through a profound transition as a consequence of conversion.¹⁹ Thus, evangelism requires sensitivity to conversion as a process while maintaining the relevance of a conversion commitment.²⁰

Conversion and Transmission

In Reformed theology, the *external calling* through the preaching of God’s Word precedes the *internal calling* of the convert, effectually leading to regeneration and the human response of conversion. A prominent example of this account is Lydia’s conversion in Acts 16:14, when “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was spoken by Paul.” Paul preached the gospel to several women. God opened Lydia’s heart to the external call, and the effectual, internal call led to Lydia’s genuine conversion.²¹ In the early church, the preaching of the gospel, which centered on the redemptive and sacrificial death of Christ on the cross, was the primary method of seeking new converts. Rather than fulfilling the demands of supernatural signs or culturally relevant wisdom, Paul and his co-workers determined to focus only on the task of preaching “Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23, also 1:18, 2:2).²² Based on his extensive

¹⁷ Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission*, 92.

¹⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 483, 483-85; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 933-935.

¹⁹ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 226.

²⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 934-935. Derek Tidball critiques the historical shift in evangelical evangelism to seek instant conversions but supports the expectation of evangelicals to consider conversion as a personal experience rather than a mere process of religious socialization. Peace puts forth various suggestions for process-oriented evangelism. Derek J. Tidball, *Reizwort evangelikal: Entwicklung einer Frömmigkeitsbewegung* [Emotive word evangelical: Development of a movement of piety], ed. Dieter Sackmann, Edition Anker (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1999), 188-91; Peace, *Conversion*, 330-345.

²¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 454.

²² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1355-59. On page 1356, Schnabel summarizes the content of gospel proclamation in the early church with three main points: “the death and resurrection of Jesus, the identity of Jesus as Messiah and Kyrios and Savior, the expected return of Jesus.” This summary stands in contrast to some contemporary scholars, such as Scot McKnight, who create a meta-narrative of the gospel, thereby sidelining the central gospel content with a message of holistic transformation. Carl Joseph Bradford, “‘Schooling’ the Gospel: An Investigation of British and German Schools of Kerygmatic

research on the mission of the early church, Schnabel deduces that “the oral proclamation of the gospel was a fundamental element of the missionary work of the early church.”²³ Paul, as a prolific leader in early Christian mission, also revealed a sincere commitment to the recipient of the message by his willingness to accommodate people from various cultural backgrounds, stating that he was ready to “become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). However, Paul always maintained the integrity of the gospel in missionary proclamation and credited the effectiveness of the Christian message to the work of the Holy Spirit rather than oratory methodology.²⁴

Derek Tidball raises two critical questions in the practice of evangelical preaching. First, he deliberates if the charismatic and Pentecostal movements replaced the centrality of the cross in Christian proclamation with the need for Spirit baptism and with portraying Jesus as conqueror over evil powers rather than Savior from sin. Secondly, Tidball wonders if evangelicals still believe in a call to conversion and the possibility of radical life change or whether the expectation of a slow process of religious, social change has replaced this core component of evangelicalism.²⁵

Conversion and Transformation

After the Reformation, Protestant theologians made a clear distinction between justification and sanctification. Justification referred to the legal, righteous standing before God as a result of regeneration and conversion at the beginning of the Christian life. Sanctification encompassed the lengthy process of continual transformation into conformity with God’s holy character after conversion. At the same time, Protestants affirmed that justification and sanctification were inseparable and that sanctification immediately followed conversion and the reception of the Holy Spirit.²⁶

Berkhof elucidates that sanctification challenges believers to two basic actions, which affect the whole person: the abandonment or “putting to death” of the old, sinful life, and the embracing of the new, holy identity in Christ (Col 3:5-11, Gal 2:19-20, 5:16-26). Simultaneously, Scripture portrays sanctification as a supernatural work of God in which the

Interpretation in the Twentieth and Twenty First Centuries” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 116-19, 121-25, 148-51, 157-59.

²³ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 34. Leon Morris delineates the NT meaning of the cross as atonement, the substitutionary death of Christ for sinners. Morris, *The Cross*, 364-419.

²⁴ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1356-62, 1479-81.

²⁵ Tidball, *Reizwort evangelikal*, 179-83, 208-09.

²⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 530.

believer co-operates: “For it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to desire and to work out His good purpose” (Phil 2:13, in conjunction with verse 12).²⁷

The inclusion of converts into Christian fellowships, theological, ethical, and ecclesiological instruction, as well as the encouragement for evangelistic outreach, naturally followed conversion in the early church (Eph 1:1-14, 4:1-16, 4:17-32, 6:15).²⁸ Hans Kasdorf explains that a restoration of the vertical relationship with God through reconciliation resulted in the restoration of the horizontal relationships within the new community of the church (2 Cor 5:20, Eph 2:13-16). The communal ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as well as church discipline, bound together the fellowship of believers (Acts 2:38-42).²⁹ Thus, a biblical understanding of conversion always entailed a view toward the total transformation of the individual within a community. In conclusion, conversion “is not an end but a beginning” of a continual transformation into greater Christlikeness (Rom 8:28-29).³⁰

The New Testament portrays conversion as a two-fold movement of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. Conversion is a supernatural act of God that guides people to a point of personal decision in response to the verbal transmission of the gospel. Conversion often requires a preceding process of inquiry and cannot be separated from a life-long commitment to personal transformation within a community. Case study findings disclose how church plants communicated a biblical understanding of conversion, how they facilitated the point and process of conversion, and why gospel diffusion in these cases generated transformational changes among converts.

Enabling Conversion through Clear Invitations into Discipleship

Each church plant of the multi-case study enabled Christian conversions through intelligible invitations and frequent opportunities for decision-making. Christian leaders guided converts toward discipleship explicitly while affirming a point and process of conversion. Thus, conversion and spiritual growth remained an integral development. Converts, in turn, reported that they grasped foundational Christian doctrines when they converted, which often occurred as a process. The primary data sources for the case studies about gospel diffusion in contemporary

²⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 532-534.

²⁸ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1370-79; Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 236-248.

²⁹ Hans Kasdorf, *Christian Conversion in Context* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 85-98, 183-91. Evangelical churches, such as Baptist churches, generally perceive baptism and the Lord’s Supper as *ordinances*, in which believers commemorate the blessing of the union with Christ and his sacrificial death. The Catholic church and traditional Protestant churches hold a *sacramental* view, in which the physical acts of baptism and the Lord’s Supper bestow spiritual blessings. Erickson provides a discussion of various views. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1089-105, 1108-23.

³⁰ Smith, *Beginning Well*, 20, 19-23; Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 120.

Germany were interviews with pastors and converts who did, in fact, experience transformational conversion. Case studies help answer the questions of how and why a “real-world phenomenon that has some concrete manifestation” occurs.³¹ The selected church plants with substantial contextualization efforts, high conversion growth, and transformative conversions depicted unusual cases in light of the general crisis of contemporary mission work in Germany and supplied the rationale for a case study design.³²

Presented Conversion Intelligibly

The case study churches presented Christian conversion intelligibly as repentance and faith in Christ. Converts across church plants confirmed a basic understanding of the Christian faith but at varying degrees when they converted. Each church plant adhered to a conservative, evangelical view of salvation and communicated the essential elements of conversion through verbal proclamation, printed materials, and online media. Pastor Lubemba from Berlin articulated the meaning of conversion most distinctly with the two necessary components of turning away from sin through repentance and turning to God by faith.³³ Lupemba explained that conversion is the change “from a self-determined life to a God-determined life, a life that was without repentance, . . . to a life of repentance” (interview with Joshua Lupemba, November 19, 2019). Pastor Müller in Munich believed that a genuine sense of man’s sinfulness and deep, personal faith in Christ, rather than what Berkhof describes as a superficial faith in historical facts, are indispensable aspects of conversion (interview with Steffen Müller, February 21, 2020).³⁴ In Erfurt, co-pastor Blum shared that they keep a low conversion threshold by focusing on personal faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. However, church leaders steer converts to repent from specific sins in their lives as soon as they decide to convert. Thus, CKE taught converts the meaning of repentance in “realistic and concrete terms” by addressing personal sin from the outset of their Christian faith (interview with Alexander Blum, April 9, 2020).³⁵ Notably, none of the churches in this case study jeopardized genuine spiritual renewal by

³¹ Robert K. Yin and Donald T. Campbell, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 31; Philipp F. Bartholomä, “Gibt es eine freikirchliche ‘Krise der Mission?’ Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme [Is there an evangelical crisis in mission? A critical assessment],” *Freikirchenforschung* 26, 2017, 218-36.

³² Yin and Campbell, *Case Study Research*, 49-62.

³³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 933-42.

³⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 504-05.

³⁵ Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission*, 92.

omitting a message of “true repentance and conversion” despite their eagerness to see numerical growth.”³⁶

Hope Center also stands exemplary for the anticipation that migrant churches can counterbalance syncretistic forces in Western churches.³⁷ HCB, for example, expected converts to have a sound understanding of conversion in contrast to Lamin Sanneh, who argues that a convert’s free choice of faith and a commitment to the church suffices to acknowledge genuine conversion. Syncretism becomes possible by reducing the test of genuine faith to the subjective understanding of the individual.³⁸

In harmony with HCB’s practice, GCM and CKE explained the theological meaning of conversion to their audiences and expected converts to respond with the biblical components of repentance and faith. At the same time, as Hiebert suggests, each church kept a low threshold of conversion by not demanding a rigid list of doctrinal knowledge from converts and continually encouraging individual decisions.³⁹ Consequently, participants disclosed a clear understanding of their conversion while exhibiting varying degrees of theological understanding during their conversion process. Anna from HCB knew that Christ forgave her sins at the time of her conversion but did not submit to biblical moral standards right away since she “did not have the understanding yet of Jesus now being the king of my life” (Interview with Anna, November 16, 2019). In each church, a firm connection between conversion and discipleship safeguarded converts to advance toward theological clarity.

Finally, pastors varied in their interpretation of how mainline churches in Germany influence conversion. Lupemba stated that the EKD (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, the mainline Protestant church of Germany) bears great responsibility to guide Christians toward a proper understanding of conversion. Herla welcomed the preparatory role of the Protestant church toward genuine conversions. The pastor viewed the conversion of prior EKD members as a deepening of faith rather than a first conversion: “What you grew up with becomes your own” (interview with Kevin Herla, April 20, 2020). Müller took a counter-cultural approach and criticized the EKD for a false understanding of salvation through infant baptism. He opposed what Timothy Tennent describes as a Christendom conversion model, where “Christian adherence comes through territory and birth rather than through repentance and personal conversion.”⁴⁰ In conclusion, all three church plants followed Newbiggin’s presupposition that a

³⁶ Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 205.

³⁷ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 68.

³⁸ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 43-47.

³⁹ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 311-312.

⁴⁰ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2007), 180;

genuine encounter of the gospel with Western culture cannot omit a personal decision of faith but “will involve contradiction, and call of conversion, for a radical metanoia, a U-turn of the mind.”⁴¹

Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making

The churches in this study provided opportunities for decision-making continuously, always pointing converts to the need for a personal experience of conversion. The two Pentecostal church plants gave invitations of conversion and offered pre-formulated prayers of conversion every Sunday, disclosing their Arminian, theological leaning and an emphasis on the human will in conversion.⁴² However, observations of worship services showed that neither of the church plants sought to manipulate people to make conversion decisions by exerting overly emotional or mental pressures.⁴³ HCB invited non-believers to repeat a prayer of commitment during the worship service. Invitations also occurred at evangelistic events and street evangelism campaigns throughout the year. Typically, CKE gave only general invitations to conversion during services. Leaders guided each person who responded positively through a prayer of conversion afterward. This practice ensured that converts understood the meaning of their decision clearly. According to vicar Treblin, pre-formulated prayers assist secular people with no experience of prayer to make decisions of conversion (interview with Elisa Treblin, April 9, 2020). Both church plants also publicized invitations of conversion through online media.

In comparison, Müller opposed pre-formulated prayers but trusted in preaching the Bible and God’s sovereignty to cause conversions, reflecting his Reformed theology.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, he encouraged non-believers in the audience persistently to contemplate a decision of conversion. Liturgical elements in worship services and especially personal conversations provided further opportunities to motivate decision-making. The frequent appeals to receive Christian salvation across church plants revealed that leaders understood conversion as a personal experience rather than merely a process of religious socialization. They remained true to what Tidball calls the heart of evangelicalism by seeking conversions unceasingly through offering opportunities for

Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. exp. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002), 9, The Countercultural Model, Kindle.

⁴¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 6.

⁴² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 932.

⁴³ Eddie Gibbs, “Conversion in Evangelistic Practice,” in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992), 285. Eddie Gibbs warns that “any attempts at persuasion must be characterized by integrity and sensitivity.”

⁴⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 471, 491.

decision-making.⁴⁵ Intriguingly, their revivalist approach to conversion, which presumes the possibility of immediate decisions, did not hinder a “genuine missionary encounter” with secular converts in this study but led to deep, transformational changes.⁴⁶ Each church planter, independent of their Arminian or Reformed convictions, knew that “the task of the preacher is not simply to inform their hearers but to invite them to respond.”⁴⁷

Despite ample opportunities for decision-making, individuals did not convert necessarily as an immediate response to a public invitation. Lara accepted the call to conversion on her first visit to CKE, but other converts described their decisions as a process or as a non-rational, spiritual experience (interview with Lara, April 25, 2020). Anna at HCB, for example, recalled that “it was rather something that happened in me personally than in a church service, traditionally, that I raised my hand [to make a decision].” Their reports reflect Al Barth’s insight that conversion processes, and not one-time decisions, were typical for secular converts across Europe.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, frequent opportunities for decision-making served as constant reminders about the need for a personal conversion experience.

Affirmed Point and Process

The leadership across all church plants affirmed the biblical data that genuine conversion has a finite beginning and allows the possibility of instantaneous change.⁴⁹ At the same time, leaders acknowledged processes of deepening understanding and commitments of converts in their Christian faith before and after a point of turnaround.⁵⁰ Correspondingly, most converts in this study experienced their conversion as a process over time, while some made instant decisions of conversion. At CKE, Treblin shared that a prolonged interaction before a conversion was sometimes necessary for someone to make a decision of faith. Quick integration of non-believers into the church community aided this developmental process before conversion. Pastor

⁴⁵ Tidball, *Reizwort evangelikal*, 190, 208-09.

⁴⁶ Stefan Paas, “Mission from Anywhere to Europe: Americans, Africans, and Australians Coming to Amsterdam,” *Mission Studies* 32, no. 1, 2015, 23.

⁴⁷ Gibbs, “Conversion,” 278, 277-78. Gibbs reflects on the Arminian belief that Christians can lose their salvation, potentially requiring multiple recommitments of conversion and thereby justifying the practice of continuous invitations. However, neither HCB nor CKE leaders proposed that the potential loss of salvation necessitates continuous decision-making opportunities.

⁴⁸ Al Barth, interview by author, Dallas, June 29. Barth was the first director of Redeemer City to City in Europe. Gibbs points out that a lack of prior Bible knowledge and exposure to congregational life makes quick decisions difficult in secular societies. Gibbs, “Conversion,” 279-80.

⁴⁹ David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 617; Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 226.

⁵⁰ Peace, *Conversion*, 279-81.

Herla viewed conversion as a one-time event of complete salvation rather than adhering to a traditional Pentecostal view of conversion in several steps.⁵¹ A step-by-step process of discipleship followed conversion since “God often reveals things he wants to change gradually.” Similarly, pastor Lupemba at HCB stated that true converts enter a discipleship process toward a “full devotion to Christ,” in which believers discover new areas of life that require transformation. The Reformed perspective that regeneration occurs before conversion caused Müller at GCM to view conversion as a sovereign act of God. Trust in God’s control allowed individuals to go through times of deliberation without the need to force a point of decision.⁵² Even So, Müller affirmed that the spiritual rebirth happens only at one point and ushers in the process of going “deeper in different areas of life.”

As mentioned previously, all three churches kept low boundaries for decisions of conversion and gave frequent invitations of decision-making. Pastors tolerated varying degrees of Christian knowledge at the point of conversion since they believed in the urgency of salvation. The leaders acknowledged the biblical data portraying “conversion and salvation in radical terms that imply urgency and instantaneous change.”⁵³ Simultaneously, they recognized conversion as a directional, gradual shift toward transformation and “a complex development over time.”⁵⁴

The interviews revealed how converts had to “think Christ into the patterns of thought they had inherited, into their networks of relationship and into their processes of decision-making.”⁵⁵ Each participant told a story of turning pre-existing cultural ways of thinking and acting toward Christian values with progressive levels of commitment and theological understanding.⁵⁶ At HCB, Anna spoke of complete devotion to Christ only after ending a pre-marital relationship with her boyfriend. Maurice at CKE admitted that grasping the reality of forgiveness in Christ continued to be a learning process even after he decided to convert (interview with Maurice, April 24, 2020). Silke at GCM explained that her conversion occurred as a process simultaneous to adopting Christian values in everyday life, “in the testing of what I heard in the sermon on Sunday” (interview with Silke, March 6, 2020). Silke’s report also resembles the testimony of other participants when she recalled that engaging in worship emotionally occurred before embracing Christianity rationally. Her story confirms Rambo’s

⁵¹ Steven M. Studebaker, “Pfingstliche Soteriologie und Pneumatologie [Pentecostal Soteriology and Pneumatology],” in *Handbuch pfingstliche und charismatische Theologie*, ed. Jörg Haustein and Giovanni Maltese (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 222-27.

⁵² Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 618-20.

⁵³ Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 617.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 5; Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 311-12.

⁵⁵ Andrew F. Walls, “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1, January, 2004, 6.

⁵⁶ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 67.

observation that a process of active participation in religious acts, such as singing, may precede a rational acknowledgment of conversion. People may “first perform religiously, and then rationalize by way of theology.”⁵⁷ In conclusion, church leaders did not see a contradiction between a passion for numerical growth, frequent calls for decision-making, and a process-oriented understanding of conversion.⁵⁸ The affirmation of both point and process supplemented each other to move individuals toward conversion and enter into a process of progressive transformation.

Connected Conversion and Discipleship

Each church plant connected conversion and discipleship to help converts transition into a process of transformation. Hope Center implemented the simultaneous steps of baptism, formal membership, and mentoring to ensure the spiritual growth of converts. Once converts committed to membership, the church assigned a personal mentor who guided new believers closely toward transformative lifestyle changes and spiritual practices. At the time of her baptism, Anna at HCB knew that her membership required total devotion to Christ: “It just would not have worked if I had not given up my whole life.”

At ConnectKirche Erfurt, a detailed, personal follow-up strategy after a decision of conversion transitioned individuals toward discipleship. Leaders met with converts quickly after their conversion to encourage reading the Bible personally and joining a small group. Hesselgrave agrees that immediate follow-up of new converts is essential since they often face doubts during a phase of dissonance after their conversion commitment.⁵⁹ Besides, pastor Herla explained that a sense of belonging through small groups is indispensable for progressive discipleship since millennials, the church’s primary target group, valued community over formal membership. Similar to Tangen’s research findings, a caring community not only attracted converts initially but moved them into a process of transformation.⁶⁰ At CKE, the ritual of adult baptism functioned as the final step toward discipleship and integration into the church body. Lara declared that her adult baptism affirmed her Christian commitment and resolution for

⁵⁷ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 114, 113-16.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 14-15. Contrastingly, Smith argues against a pre-occupation with numerical conversions and calls of instant conversion since conversion is a process rather than a point of decision.

⁵⁹ Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 620-22. Hesselgrave urges missionaries for diligent, immediate follow-up within forty-eight hours after conversion. On page 621, he warns that if “follow-up is haphazard or (as is often the case) too little and too late, the new convert may yield to the temptation to return to the old way rather than take up his cross and follow Christ.”

⁶⁰ Karl Inge Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification Beyond Late Modern Individualism? A Case Study of Life Strategies in Growing Late Modern Churches*, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 311-12.

transformational changes: “I let go of the old and decided on something new for me.” Miranda Klaver concludes in her study of conversion in two Dutch evangelical churches that the physical act of baptism helps converts to authenticate their mental ascent to conversion: “The evangelical ritual of baptism has the power to make the ‘abstract’ real to the believer.”⁶¹

In comparison, Gospel Church Munich transitioned converts toward discipleship by focusing on a gospel-centered approach to biblical instruction without a formalized follow-up program. Müller believed that the gospel message itself and the experience of grace causes people to “grow in sanctification,” leaning on Keller’s view that revival and transformation occur through the communication of the gospel.⁶² Baptism and formal membership played a secondary role as steps toward spiritual growth, particularly since GCM accepted infant baptism as a valid form of baptism before conversion. Nonetheless, the adult baptism and membership commitment of Andreas at GCM strengthened his resolve of faith and service in the church (interview with Andreas, March 11, 2020).

In summary, church plants followed Smith’s appeal to integrate conversion with a commitment to discipleship embedded within the church community, thereby preventing “cheap grace” and superficial decisions of faith.⁶³ However, churches also retained the urgency of conversion through frequent appeals for decision-making. All church leaders steered converts toward Christian discipleship to ensure transformational changes but varied in their degree of organizational planning and implementation of membership and baptism. The benefit of membership varied among converts, while all converts who pursued baptism described this as solidifying component in their discipleship process. The ritual of baptism marked “the transition from one stage to the next” in their self-perception as newly converted Christians.⁶⁴

Conclusion

A biblical view of conversion entails a two-fold movement of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. While conversion is a supernatural act of God, people need to respond to the verbal transmission of the gospel with a personal decision of faith. The biblical data confirms that conversions may entail deliberation processes but cannot be separated from a life-long commitment to Christian discipleship.

⁶¹ Miranda Klaver, “This Is My Desire: A Semiotic Perspective on Conversion in an Evangelical Seeker Church and a Pentecostal Church in the Netherlands” (Dr. diss., Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 387, 383–90.

⁶² Timothy Keller, *Center Church Deutsch: Kirche in der Stadt*, Center church Germany: Church in the city, trans. Jutta Schierholz (Gießen: Brunnen, 2017), 83–85.

⁶³ Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 11-12, 14-15, 87-90.

⁶⁴ Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 229, 228-30; David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 182-84.

In comparison, the multi-case study about three evangelical church plants in Germany revealed that church leaders presented conversion intelligibly and provided frequent opportunities for decision-making. They affirmed processes of deliberation by converts and kept low boundaries for decision-making due to the urgency of salvation. Simultaneously, pastors expected a clear understanding of conversion and urged converts to transition into discipleship immediately. All converts, in turn, reported that they experienced transformational conversion despite often describing their conversion as a process and varying in the depth of their theological understanding.

In conclusion, the second-generation migrant church HCB, the new Pentecostal church CKE, and GCM, operating within a global church planting network, are salient examples of evangelical, missional engagements in Germany. Each church plant's ministry discloses that conversions are possible despite the challenges of a secular, post-Christian culture. Clear invitations into discipleship were a key component for enabling transformational conversion. Evangelicals yearn for the undiminished power of the gospel to bring salvation to many through repentance and faith in the cross before Christ's return (Ro 1:16, 1 Cor 9:22).

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