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This study began as a doctoral dissertation directed by John Barclay at the University of Glasgow. Resembling little of the redundant and tiresome characteristics of that genre, this book offers refreshingly new and, at points, innovative light upon the well-worn path of Paul’s conversion and his theology. Rather than another treatment of conversion affecting theology, Chester ably grapples with Paul’s conception of conversion of others as well as his converts’ own perceptions of the experience, most notably those of the church he founded in Corinth.


The last section of part 1 narrows the focus of the investigation and outlines the theoretical resources the author brings to the discussion. In contrast to numerous examinations of Paul’s own conversion and of its impact on his theology, the author rightly notes the paucity of work exploring the apostle’s perceptions of the conversion of nonmessianic Jews and Gentiles (31). This seems a worthy endeavor, since Paul’s entire ministry was engaged in making converts! Chester takes up the challenge to redress the imbalance on this subject. The author makes a detailed analysis of the Corinthian congregation because of the rich interface between this community and its founder and because “1 Corinthians is unusual among the NT documents in the degree to which it concentrates on issues of communal life” (32; 2 Corinthians is virtually undiscussed—of just ten references, most are relegated to the footnotes). Chester feels this is a particularly suitable text given the rich archaeological record available for first-century Corinth and its clearly defined historical and geographical location within the wider context of Greco-Roman culture. Communal and individual dimensions of conversion thought to be reflected at Corinth fit well with Chester’s intended focus upon the individual and social phenomenon of conversion.

A determinative heuristic tool for the author’s attempts to understand conversion draw from recent developments in the social sciences. In particular, the work employs structuration theory as developed by Anthony Giddens. Throughout Chester cites approvingly the recent sociohistorical study on the Corinthian church by D. Horrell (The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996]), which also draws heavily upon Giddens’s theoretical approach. After critiquing alternatives to structuration theory, Chester outlines its potential benefits. The distinctive aspect of Giddens’s social theory is its emphasis on the “process” of the continuing “structuring of relationships over time and space” (The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration [Cambridge: Polity, 1984], 48). Part of the appeal is its concern to turn facile dualisms into dualities and to see “no legitimate methodological distinctions between sociology and history” (Chester, 41–42, citing Horrell, 26–31).
Part 2 constitutes the heart of the study. “Conversion and Soteriology,” the first chapter of this section (50), raises the practical issues of how conversion was thought to take place and the nature of its expected consequences on Paul’s converts at Corinth. This draws Chester into discussing dominant trends in the analysis of Paul’s soteriology. After a brief history, which traces and summarizes key issues in the ongoing debate, the author seeks to debunk three commonly held views on Paul in the “post-Sanders” era.

(1) While agreeing with a majority of scholars that Pauline soteriology works from “solution to plight,” Chester nevertheless seeks to refute the claim that the apostle’s theology of sin is not rooted in his own conversion experience, the insistence on the unimportance of justification by faith, and the view that Paul’s conversion experience holds little significance for his theology in general. (2) Chester also challenges the general consensus that what is central in Paul’s theology is either participation in Christ or salvation history—not forensic terminology, which is defined in other ways and is of no crucial importance to him. (3) Finally, Chester disputes the claim that the significance of Paul’s gospel for the individual is merely a subsidiary level of his thought and that the communal and/or cosmic levels of Paul’s thinking receive primary attention.

Questioning these assumptions in these three areas provide the themes that run throughout the work. Chapter 3, “God’s Converting Call,” is devoted to the vocabulary that Paul uses to denote conversion. Chester’s survey of Paul’s preferred use of the group of cognate terms (καλέω, κλησις, κλητος) depict conversion as a divine calling. This chapter (and the corresponding appendix 1 [325–27], which classifies and cites each use of καλέω κτλ. in Paul) is the most informative of the book. Interestingly, Paul uses a variety of terms to identify the beginning of the Christian life. He never describes it in monolithic fashion and rarely in terms that are commonly used in conservative circles today, namely, “being saved” (σωζω). Upon ascertaining that Paul’s most frequent usage of καλέω κτλ. regards the new role/identity created by that calling, Chester rightly asks if this suggests that Paul’s focus is on the “before” and especially the “after” of calling—from what and to what—rather than on the event itself? In other words, does this imply that Paul is less concerned with how conversion transpires than with the individual and communal consequences of that conversion? After taking up calling language in the Septuagint and Greco-Roman philosophy (with closest parallels occurring in Epictetus), the author summarizes his findings and concludes that, along with major similarities between them and Paul, the latter makes distinctive usages of the term. Pauline distinctives include his historical use of calling to signify conversion (e.g., 1 Cor 7:21) and the radical relativity of every ethnic and social distinction of those divinely called, whether Jew or Greek.
Chapters 4 and 5 take up Gentile and Jewish conversion, respectively. The former offers an extended analysis of 1 Cor 6:9–11 and 14:20–25, arguing for the individual and communal aspects of conversion within the Gentile community at Corinth. The latter examines Paul’s own conversion and attitude toward Judaism after his encounter with Christ. Chester wrestles with the key passages, Gal 1:11–17; Phil 3:4–12; and even Rom 7:7–25. He follows this with a helpful exegetical study of 1 Cor 4:1–5, ending with a six-point summary of conclusions. Chester views Rom 7 as a “clear case of biographical reconstruction” (185) from a new Christian perspective. He contends for Paul’s preconversion state here as wretched. While Paul did not originally experience it as such, it nevertheless “reflects the typical behaviour of converts” (185 n. 126) and thus is typical “biographical reconstruction” behavior as commonly adduced by sociologists of conversion (195). If this is correct, conversion to Christ shattered former illusions about the deceptiveness and surpassing power of sin over even a staunchly zealous Pharisee as Saul himself. Thus, Paul’s theology of sin was rooted in his conversion experience (see common assumption no. 1 above). Both Gal 1 and Phil 3 apply the same vocabulary to Paul’s own conversion, as he elsewhere applies it to that of Gentiles—clearly indicating that Gentile and Jewish conversions are one and the same. Chester propounds a useful corrective in arguing that forensic categories matter to Paul and that Paul can be creative in his attempts to depict conversion by sometimes allowing “forensic and participatory terminology to interpret each other” (205 and see the extended discussion in appendix 2 on Rom 6:7 [329–36]; contra Sanders et al., assumption no. 2). “To separate them is to damage them, for divorced from one another, each may become less than itself” (209). Chester levels criticism against the third common assumption by underscoring the significance of the individual throughout this section, especially in his discussion of 1 Cor 4:1–5. He also cites T. Engberg-Pederson’s recent efforts toward a reemphasis on the individual in Paul (see esp. Paul and the Stoics [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000]).

Part 3 seeks to delineate the Corinthians’ own understanding of conversion. It addresses in turn Corinthian conversion and Greco-Roman culture in general and the voluntary associations and mystery cults of the day in particular. The author sees clear influences of voluntary associations and mystery initiations on the thinking and behavior of Paul’s converts living in mid-first-century Greco-Roman Corinth. Both are viewed as debilitating factors that militate against vital internal unity and wholesome separation from unbelievers that the Corinthians’ conversion calling should entail. The third and final appendix deals in more detail with mystery-cult meals in first-century Corinth. There Chester argues against Paul’s understanding of Christian rites, especially baptism, as seen through the light of mystery cult practices. Chapter 10 concludes the study with a brief overview of Paul’s and the Corinthians’ understanding of conversion. Chester sees the mark of the wider culture through the associations and mystery cults operating in
Corinth in two significant ways: (1) seeing smaller groups rather than the entire congregation as the focus of loyalty and commitment for individual converts; and (2) seeing those outside the believing community as “characterised more by unwitting inferiority than by infectious impurity…. In the Corinthians’ understanding, conversion elevates but does not separate” (319).

In short, this is a well-presented, thoroughly researched contribution to the subject of conversion in Paul. To his credit, Chester never forces the data on the Procrustean bed of some narrowly cast definition. Yet his triad of assumptions about Paul said to be held by the scholarly majority is overstated. Even here, however, his learned nuancing of the issues and informed discussions of questions and implications that arise from those assumptions are invaluable. Indeed, this is arguably the best particular study to date on the conversion of Paul and of the church at Corinth as reflected in 1 Corinthians. Nevertheless, room for improvement remains. Surprisingly, Chester offers proportionately scant discussion or concern for the work and role of the Spirit in conversion. This is unfortunate, given the unique concentration of occurrences of the term “divine Spirit, Holy Spirit” (πνευμα) in 1 Corinthians! Why no discussion of 1 Cor 9:1? And why inconsistency in language translation: the Greek text always and German authors occasionally? Notwithstanding these oversights, his bibliography and useful indices are generally complete and accurate. Chester is to be heartily thanked for this stimulating study. He is a worthy dialogue partner for any scholar seeking further understandings of Paul and conversion.