

Conversion - Part 1: God Fearers

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There is an interesting phrase that appears a few times throughout the New Testament. In Acts, certain people are referred to as "those who fear God". Paul spoke to a group of these people in Acts 13, and Cornelius seems to belong to this lot as well. What is meant by "those who fear God", and is there a difference between this group and someone who is called "a proselyte"?

The word proselyte appears four times in the New Testament, and every time it appears it refers to a Gentile converted to Judaism. These people not only agreed that there is no other God than Jehovah, but they wanted to join themselves to the Jewish people. The "God-fearers" were also Gentiles, but they were seen differently from Judaism's perspective. While they agreed that there is no other God than Jehovah, they were not, for whatever reason, joined to Judaism.

Try to imagine how you would view these people if you were Jewish. We would probably see them as those who were unwilling to make a commitment. To us, they would only be willing to go halfway in their dedication to God. Why could they not follow the example of other Gentiles who joined themselves to Judaism? What were they afraid of? What were they not willing to give up? What did they not understand? Our initial reaction to the situation would, likely, be to find fault with them for some reason, in some way, in order to alleviate our discomfort with their situation.

What we would fail to realize is that there was nothing wrong with those people. They had come to the correct conclusion, they had believed all the evidence, and they were converted to God. What we would fail to realize is that the problem was with us.

The heavens declare the glory of God — not of Judaism. The sky above proclaims God's handiwork — not the work done in the temple. What can be known about God has been made plain to all mankind through the creation, namely Jehovah's eternal power and divine nature; these things have been clearly seen since the creation of the world and all mankind is without an excuse. An excuse for what? Not becoming Jewish? No, we are without an excuse for not being converted to God.

It was never, nor has it ever been, God's purpose to convert people to a particular religion. God's purpose, from the beginning of time, has always been to convert people to himself. Conversion is not a process of changing from one religion to another. It is not merely the putting away of one god to worship another. Conversion is the act of deciding to return to the creator in the original role he intended for his creation; it is the resubmission of the disobedient child to their Father.

While many of the Jews, I am sure, had noble intentions in making proselytes of the nations, that is not really what God wanted. Christ's complaint against the Pharisees was that they converted foreign people to Judaism only to assure that they were children of the evil one (Matthew 23.15). The Lord was seeking God-fearers amongst the Gentiles, not proselytes to Judaism. Jehovah was seeking God-fearers amongst the Jews, too.

In our efforts to teach people about God, we must not fall into the same trap as the Jews. If our efforts are to convert people to our religion, even when we are successful we fail. Rahab, Ruth, Cyrus, and Nebuchadnezzar are some examples of people who were first converted to God. It was only after their hearts were inclined toward God, not a religion, that they changed who they were and how they acted. These people were God-fearers in truth, not proselytes.

In all our dealings with other people, let us make sure that we first fear God, and then, and only then, let us look for others to convert to our creator, not our religion.