

Take the very first account we have of the spread of early Christianity, the New Testament book of Acts. The conversions begin, naturally enough, with Jews, just weeks after Jesus's death. They happen because of miracles. The first episode occurs already in chapter 2, the famous account of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost was an annual Jewish festival that occurred fifty days after Passover. In this account, that would be just under two months after Jesus's death and resurrection. In the story there are by this time a 120 believers, all gathered together in Jerusalem, awaiting the Holy Spirit that the resurrected Jesus promised would come upon them. It does so in a show of power. The believers hear the noise of a loud rushing wind, tongues of flame appear above their heads, and they all begin to speak in foreign languages they do not know. An exceedingly curious crowd gathers: Jews from around the world who are at the festival. All of them hear the gospel of Christ proclaimed in their own tongue. It is a great miracle, and the crowd is "amazed and perplexed."

The miracle is followed by a sermon delivered by the head apostle, Peter, who explains that the onlookers have seen a fulfillment of the prophecies of Scripture. Jesus, who was killed "by lawless people" just weeks before, had been a great miracle worker. After his death an even greater miracle occurred: God raised him from the dead. The person that they, the Jews, had crucified has been made Lord of all. The Jewish crowds cry out, asking what they should do. Peter tells them all to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. They do so: three thousand people convert on the spot (Acts 2:1–41).

From that point on we learn that "many wonders and signs were done through the apostles" (Acts 2:43). As a result, their numbers grew day after day.

The next main episode comes in the next chapter and involves another miracle. A man lame from birth is begging for alms at the Jerusalem temple. The apostles Peter and John pass by and, in response to the man's request for money, Peter tells him he has something even better to provide. He heals him on the spot. The crowds all marvel, inspiring Peter to launch into another speech about Jesus as

A PAUSE FOR MIRACULOUS REFLECTION

Before looking at these tales, we need to pause. How are we to credit the Christian stories of miraculous conversions? Anyone who wants to accept them at face value will say they happened. But what about everyone else? We are confronted with three inescapable facts, all of which need to be accounted for. First, it cannot be denied that people did convert to the Christian faith, eventually in massive numbers. Second, the early Christian accounts of conversion, starting with the New Testament, attribute conversions to the great miracles being performed. Third, many people today—almost all non-Christians

but a lot of critical Christians as well—do not think these miracles really happened.

In explaining all three facts, one option is simply to claim that conversions happened (since they did indeed happen) for reasons other than what our sources say. A skeptic might attribute them instead to the attractions of community or to superior health care or the like. That is a common line to take. But we should not abandon our sources too quickly. As we will continue to see, they abundantly attest that the conversions took place precisely because of miracles.

And so an alternative might suggest itself. When people believe in miracles today, it is rarely because they have actually experienced one. Some people claim they have, but not most. In fact, most people who believe in miracles have not even observed one, let alone been the beneficiary of one. What all believers in miracles do have in common is that they have heard of miracles. Often they have heard of miracles from others who claimed the miracles happened to them. More often they have heard of miracles from others who claimed they personally observed them happen to someone else—or who claimed to know someone who knew someone else who knew someone else who observed them.

Most believers in miracles today have only heard about miracles. It is reasonable to assume that this is why most people in early Christianity believed in miracles. They heard stories such as those found in the book of Acts. These are literary narratives, not disinterested historical records. They are accounts that had been told by word of mouth before someone wrote them down. Many people today believe the Holy Spirit really did come upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost and made them speak in tongues—a great miracle. They believe it because they have read the story in Acts 2.

We might suppose this is how it worked in early Christianity. People heard the stories. Most people did not believe them. Some, after hearing enough stories repeated time after time, began to consider them possible. Eventually they came to believe them. They then converted. It is not necessarily because the apostles and their followers were really doing miracles. They may have been or they may not have

been. But when told with enough conviction, the stories certainly proved convincing to others. And there is proof: people did convert, and the reason stated was almost always the same. The words of the Christians were backed up by stories of miracles.