

### **Paul's Conversion and Ours**

*“Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” Acts 9:15*

There are many conversions recorded in the Book of Acts, but none as dramatic as Saul's. Compared to his, most conversions are unspectacular. They are not accompanied by divine lightning and the appearance of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Believers are not physically blinded and audibly confronted by Jesus. They are not commanded to go and wait for instructions and they do not stop eating and drinking for three days. The Church in Jerusalem experienced explosive growth. Thousands were added to the believing community. They responded to the preached word and the simple terms of conversion, set forth by Peter, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). However, these simple directions often accompany a complex process of coming to Christ. There are spiritual, intellectual, psychological and social challenges that often make conversion a conflicted and extended experience.

Most of us come to Christ the way the first disciples did. Someone invites us to consider Christ, to spend time with him in his Word and to consider the claims of the gospel. For many, conversion is not a singular moment or decision but a process of “multiple encounters and experiences” that culminate in becoming a devoted follower of Jesus Christ (Smith, “Making Sense of Conversion,” *Theology, News and Notes*, Spring 2003, 5). Some people don't remember a particular time when they became a Christian. They feel like they have always believed in Christ. Their early childhood experiences merge with a growing awareness of Christ during their teenage years. Over time, they differentiate their emerging adult faith in Christ from the faith of their parents. They sense within themselves a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus and the presence of the Spirit of Christ in their lives.

In the end all real conversions to Christ are definitive and decisive. The process may be extended but eventually faith in Christ comes to a conclusion. We “affirm that a person does become a Christian (and not merely that we are all becoming Christians). We do need to be able to speak in the past tense of the wonder that, by the grace of God, we have become children of God; this is now the most significant fact of our identity” (Smith, 5).

Such conversions are as authentic as the apostle Paul's. They share the same dynamics, even if they don't share the same dramatics. All true conversions are centered in Christ and initiated by the Spirit. They involve personal repentance for sin, authentic transformation, a new direction in life, and participation in the Body of Christ. Conversions were never meant to be a solitary,

individualized experience, much less a quick verbal assent to some Christian doctrine. Conversion is always accompanied by two necessary consequences. To be converted is to be called into Christ's service and included in Christ's community.

## **Conversion**

It is clear that Paul's conversion would never have happened apart from divine intervention. He had declared war on those who "belonged to the Way." Stephen's earnest testimony only inflamed Saul's hatred and steeled his resolve to put down what he had concluded was a dangerous perversion of Judaism. After Philip's evangelism in Samaria and the African official's conversion, Luke brings the story back to Jerusalem where "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (9:1). As far as Saul was concerned, the followers of Jesus were fanatics who opposed the Temple and the Law. If they were allowed to continue, they would rob Israel of the Messianic Age. If there ever was a person who did not expect to be converted it was Saul.

Some have tried to get inside the mind of Saul and speculate on his spiritual state. Their theory is that Saul was fighting against the persuasive impact of the gospel and the unnerving courage of the believers. He was desperately trying to slay the dragons of doubt that afflicted his mind, and repress his own impulse to convert. His vehemence against the cause of Christ allegedly masked his own inner turmoil. But this theory does not fit with how Paul described his pre-conversion spiritual state. He was not driven by doubt or guilt. If anything, he was driven by an unwavering passion for the Law of Moses. "Humanly speaking he was immune to the Christian proclamation and immensely satisfied with his own ancestral faith" (Longenecker, 368). He was not beset by self-doubt, but filled with self-confidence. He was, as he said, "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil 3:5-6).

If there is any explanation for Saul's certainty that the followers of Jesus were dead wrong and dangerous fanatics, it is that Jesus was crucified. Paul would later say, "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). It was the "offense of the cross" that sealed Saul's utter contempt for the church. And as far as Saul was concerned there was plenty of precedent for his violent actions against the church in the Old Testament biblical narrative. He would have found justification for his actions in Moses' attack against apostasy and Phinehas' zeal for the honor of God. Just as they had waged war against the immoral Israelites at Baal-peor, Saul waged war against those who belonged to the Way (Num 25:1-13).

There is a difference between being angry *for* God and being angry *at* God, but both may have their roots in religion. Martin Luther struggled with his anger *at* God. "I hated the word 'righteousness' of God," wrote Luther. "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I

was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. . . . I did not love, yes, I hated the righteousness of God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God. . . . Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience” (Luther, Works, vol.34:336-337).

Before their conversions Saul and Luther were ignorant of God’s good news, both resisted the grace of Christ, and both attempted to live the best kind of life they knew. But their spirits were angry, disturbed and violent. In some respects, Saul’s religious zeal was like that of today’s Islamic radicals engaged in fighting a “holy war” against “the Great Satan.” There is nothing more powerful than religiously sanctioned hate and violence. In Saul’s case, he went “to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem” (9:1-2). It was important for Saul to receive official religious sanction for what he did. Later Paul will write, “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim 1:13-16). It is true: there is nothing more powerful than religiously sanctioned hatred and violence—except, that is, for the grace of Christ.

Saul was unconvinced by the logic of early Christian preaching, unmoved by the costly sacrifice of believers, and unimpressed by the growth of the church. It must have angered Saul that the followers of Jesus were known as “the Way.” How could they possibly think of themselves as walking in the true path of God’s salvation? (Jn 14:6). Every time Peter’s defense before the Sanhedrin echoed in his mind he was filled with what he felt was righteous indignation. How could anyone say that “Salvation is found in one else,” but in a crucified blasphemer? How could any true Israelite say, “for there is no other name, given under heaven,” but Jesus, “by which we must be saved” (4:12). Saul was so obsessed with persecuting believers that he walked the 150 miles to Damascus to round them up (26:11). No distance was too far: no trouble too great to do all in his power “to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (26:9). The evangelistic avenues of reason, testimony and experience were blocked by a religious zeal that could not see the light for the darkness. Humanly speaking, Saul was the world’s worst candidate for conversion. But one must never underestimate the sovereign grace of God.

In a moment, everything changed. There was a blinding flash of light and a voice from heaven, asking, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul thought he was defending God, not persecuting God. For a religiously driven person this was a shocking question.

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. The reference to “Lord” can hardly be equated with a deferential “sir”—a mere sign of polite respect. Saul immediately comprehends the very presence

and voice of God, but the answer to his question was shockingly unexpected.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” The explosion of truth that went off in Saul’s mind must have been immense. In an instant, God’s self revelation translated into an overwhelming realization, exploding the myth of the crucified blasphemer and condemning Saul’s zeal against the church. Suddenly, Jesus goes from being the most despised and despicable man Saul had ever heard of, to being the Messiah. Jesus, the crucified one, is none other than the living Lord and to persecute his church was to persecute the risen Christ himself.

The dynamic between revelation and realization in Saul’s conversion is spectacularly focused and intense. This “big bang” of truth that blows up on the Damascus road has the significance of Abraham’s call or Moses’ burning bush experience. It captures a turning point in Salvation History on the order of David’s anointing or Jeremiah’s call. We should not be disappointed if our conversion is not marked by a blinding light from heaven and a challenge to our blasphemous religious zeal. Saul’s conversion is unique, not only for its supernatural drama, but for its place in Salvation History. It proves that no one is beyond the pale of God’s electing grace and demonstrates that God can turn the most violent enemy of the Faith into his chosen instrument.

Saul went to Damascus to arrest believers, but it was God who arrested him. God took the initiative and took hold of him (Phil 3:12). Isn’t this true of all conversions? We may not be blinded by a flash of lightning, but doesn’t the light of God’s truth need to penetrate our minds and hearts? We may not be challenged for persecuting the church, but are we not confronted by our sin? Can any of us believe in Jesus apart from the Spirit of Christ convicting and convincing us of the gospel? Aren’t all conversions dependent on the initiative of God?

God’s intervention, while spectacular in Saul’s conversion, is often hidden and goes undetected in our lives. Sometimes it is not until we look back in life that we see the providential hand of God. In *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis speaks of God closing in on him, but at the time he was hardly aware of God. In retrospect he came to appreciate the love of God that would not let him go, but initially he rejected it. He felt like he was “holding something at bay, or shutting something out.” He tried to steel himself against the advance of God, for as Lewis observed, “a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully” (179-180). Lewis felt like a fox on the run with the sound of hounds not too far off. His defenses were melting faster than a snowman on a sunny day. He was like the catch of the day being reeled in by “the great Angler.” Lewis observed that “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about *man’s search for God*,” but that made as much sense to him as talking “about the mouse’s search for the cat” (182). In the end, he had no more moves to make; he conceded checkmate. Most of us have a lot of time to think about it. Paul had only seconds to respond.

## **Commission**

Saul's conversion to Christ was inseparable from his commissioning. Belief and action go together. For Saul the bottom line was simple. He heard a voice, say in effect, "I am Jesus and I am telling you what to do." Although it was remarkably compressed in the life of Saul, this integration of faith and faithfulness, must take place in our lives. In Christ, who we are and what we do were meant to become one in the same. Our conversion and our calling are joined by the Spirit of Christ. No one knew this better than Paul, who said, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: The old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:17-19). Not only are we reconciled to God, but we are given a ministry of reconciliation. J. I. Packer writes, "The only proof of conversion is a life of convertedness (that is, continual turning from the calls of carnal self to God and his service)" ("The Means of Conversion," Crux, 12/89, 17).

One moment Saul was marching to Damascus to persecute the church and the next moment he was being led by the hand into Damascus. "For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything" (9:9). For three days he waited in the dark, seeing only the light of Christ. For three days he fasted, hungering for the righteousness of Christ. For three days he waited in silence, praying for things to come. We can only imagine Saul's reappraisal of Salvation History and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Meanwhile, the Lord called a disciple living in Damascus by the name of Ananias to visit Saul and lay hands on him. The spectacular intervention of God on the Damascus road is quickly transposed by God into a mediating partnership, first with Ananias and then the church. The Lord chose to work through a disciple in Damascus to establish Saul in fellowship, in the Holy Spirit, and in baptism. The supernatural character of the divine initiative was set to play itself out through a cautious and reluctant disciple, who questioned the Lord's wisdom in reaching out to a reputed enemy of the church. The Lord's response to Ananias' was really a one word directive, "Go!" The word stands out, not only in the text, but in my mind, because I remember asking my mother whether I should undertake a certain ministry. Somewhat exasperated, she answered back with a loud, "Go!" I still hear her voice saying, "Go!" and it is a reminder to me to fulfill God's will.

Added to the Lord's unqualified directive, "Go!" was the reason for Ananias' visit, and more importantly, the reason why Saul's conversion was so significant in Luke's mind for the emerging church. "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (9:15-16). No sooner was Saul converted than he was called and his call opened the door to the worldwide mission of the Church. This is why Saul's conversion was so pivotal to Salvation History and ranks right up there with Abraham's call, Moses' burning bush experience, and Daniel's vision. The reason for Saul's heaven-ordained mission coincides with the essence of Peter's Pentecost message: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given

under heaven by which we must be saved” (4:12). Saul has a new identity, a new purpose and a new destiny. Drawing on a metaphor from the work of a potter, the Lord describes Saul as a chosen vessel, an instrument designed for a particular purpose (Jer 18:1-11; 22:28; Hos 8:8; 2 Cor 4:7; 2 Tim 2:20-21; Williams, 157). The priority of Saul’s mission would be to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles and to participate in Christ’s suffering (Col 1:24).

What was true for Paul was meant to be true for us. The Lord designed conversion and calling to be united. Faith and works go hand-in-hand. Belief and action merge. Like Paul, our identity, purpose and destiny are redefined by the risen Lord Jesus. And what God has joined together let no man separate. But there is a third important dimension that cannot be ignored and should always be united with conversion. Luke turns his attention to this third dimension when he describes the role that Ananias and Barnabas served in bringing Paul into the fellowship of believers. Conversion, commission, and community belong together in Christ.

## **Community**

Ananias went to the house on Straight Street, which is still the main east-west thoroughfare in Damascus. Upon entering he placed his hands on Saul, addressed him as brother, identified himself with the Lord Jesus and described Saul’s experience and his reason for coming. Ananias is a wonderful example of how the church should receive new members. The Lord used Ananias to welcome Saul into the fellowship of believers, marking his visit with physical healing and strengthening, water baptism, and the filling of the Holy Spirit. Through Ananias, Saul joined the disciples in Damascus and he immediately began to have an impact. Luke writes, “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (9:20).

We don’t know how long Saul was in Damascus. It seems likely that Luke abbreviates Saul’s spiritual biography. His reference to time is vague. “After many days had gone by,” may cover the period of time that Saul spent in Arabia, including the “three years” before he went to Jerusalem (Gal 1:13-18; 2 Cor 11:32-33). What Luke does emphasize in detail, is Saul’s immediate evangelistic impact and the role that Ananias in Damascus and Barnabas in Jerusalem played in welcoming Saul into the fellowship of believers. Paul will later stress that his preaching was not influenced by consulting any human beings (Gal 1:16), but Luke stresses in Acts that before Saul preached the gospel in Damascus and Jerusalem he was received and supported by the Body of Christ. Saul’s emergency departure from Damascus was aided by his fellow believers. He who had come to destroy the believing community was now being saved by that community. When Saul came to Jerusalem, Luke says that “he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.” Enter Barnabas, who “took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus” (9:27).

The example of Ananias and Barnabas ought to inspire our efforts to welcome converts, encourage new members and reach out to new believers. Their practical ministry to Saul should be included in the overall picture of God's sovereign grace just as much as the dramatic intervention that brought Saul to the Lord. "There is an urgent need for modern Ananiases and Barnabases who overcome their [inhibitions] and hesitations, and take the initiative to befriend newcomers" (Stott, 178). Paul's courage to speak boldly in the name of the Lord was matched by other believers' concern for his life and safety.

Luke ends this section with a summary statement: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers" (9:31). Saul's conversion ended an intense period of persecution that had begun with Stephen's martyrdom. "Things calmed down after that and the church had smooth sailing for a while" (The Message). This reprieve from persecution gave believers an opportunity to consolidate their position and experience being the Household of Faith. Luke speaks of these scattered communities of believers throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria as being but one "body" of Christ, constituting one church, living in the reverential fear of the Lord, enjoying the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and growing in numbers. These five characteristics continue to be a sign of a healthy church. The church is blessed when it has peace from external opposition, internal strength, encouragement from the Holy Spirit, reverential fear of God, and numerical growth. These characteristics are not achieved by entrepreneurial zeal or by innovative programming, but by the sovereign grace of God and the blessing of the Holy Spirit. To say that the peace and strength of the church is of God, not man, does not render the believer passive and indifferent but passionate and grateful. The source for encouragement, reverential fear and growth are not found in our own resources but in God's blessing. This is where it is absolutely crucial that we see conversion, commission and community united in one personal life and in one "body" of Christ.