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## *The Conversion of St. Paul*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam G. Candler**  
**Evensong – The Conversion of St. Paul**

Today, our service of Evensong observes the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul.

Thus we nod to two concepts that have not often been popular among recent progressive Christians: “Conversion” and “Saint Paul.” Horrors, some of us might say! Surely, we do not mean to be touting obnoxious or simplistic conversion practices. Some of us have been trained to think that conversion is for the simple-minded, or at least for the emotional-hearted, not for the tough thinkers that we consider we ourselves are.

And, Saint Paul! He is attacked by all sorts of critics these days. People claim he distorted that original message of Jesus when he set up communities of faith across the ancient Mediterranean. Critics claim that he was a prisoner to his cultural context, too, unable to grant women, for instance, their proper place in a progressive world.

This afternoon, I propose that we dismiss those two sorts of criticism. I give thanks today for the conversion of Saint Paul.

First, a word about conversion. It is a good thing. It is a necessary phenomenon. It is conversion, for instance, that always drives the engine of world progress. Without people willing to be converted, we would have no Darwinian theory of evolution. Remember: people had to have their minds changed on that theory! Without conversion, we would have no Copernican theory of planetary motion. In that instance, you may recall, the Christian Church was primary among those who needed to be converted!

What a tragedy! Conversion is implicit and necessary in Christianity; but, once we are converted, the Christian Church has often resisted the notion of being converted itself. If we are to model examples of grace, however, then we must also model the example of how to be converted gracefully, how to change gracefully.

Conversion is a good thing.

And Saint Paul was a good person, too. Yes, he was like every one of us. No matter what our conversion, we carry old baggage with us, baggage that might not be discarded in our culture until generations and centuries after us. Saint Paul was not the only human being bound by his time and culture.

By the way, it was Saint Paul who appointed the leader of the first Christian church in what is now Europe, and that person was a woman! The first person in Europe to host a Christian church community in her home was Lydia, in Philippi. We rightly observe her feast day two days from now, on January 27. St. Paul deserves credit for advancing women, not blame! (“There is no longer male and female,” he would say at Galatians 3:28, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”)

But I believe Paul was actually a religious genius. What Paul taught about psychology, and especially religious psychology, was nothing short of genius. Despite the simple story of his being thrown from his horse on his way to Damascus, and being blinded for three days until he recognized Christ, I believe his effectual conversion took years to mature. It was just like the maturity of each of us, no matter what our original and overwhelming encounter with God was.

Over those years, the conversion of Saint Paul taught him that the human soul longs to be set free. The human soul longs to be released from the bondage and luggage of our lives. That bondage and luggage is what Paul came to recognize as

“law.” That was his own Jewish concept, to be sure, but the concept can be translated into any human culture or religion.

Our communities of faith develop customs and behaviors that are good for us, so good that they become “law.” But then, somehow, the letter of the law turns against freedom, and the law turns ultimately against love.

In his genius, Paul realized that we are saved not by works which try to scrupulously satisfy the law, but we are saved by Christ. Christ, we might say, is faith itself – the power of believing only the ultimate goodness and freeing love of God. Paul was set free from law when he encountered the true and living and loving Christ.

That is the freedom that we celebrate today. When we observe the Feast Day of the Conversion of Saint Paul, we are celebrating the freedom of the human soul. It is the very principle of salvation. Saint Paul was converted into the realization that Jesus Christ came to set us free – free from any principle or law or expectation that keeps us in bondage.

“For freedom,” Paul said, “for freedom, Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1).

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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