
Conversion and Saint Paul

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Easter 3 – Year C

“Now as [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus...’” (Acts 9:3–5)

A “Damascus Road experience!” we say. A “conversion!” And in that famous episode, the persecutor “Saul” became the apostle “Paul.”

But since that dramatic event, some Christians have grown understandably wary of the term “conversion” and the person of Saint Paul. Those two images, “conversion,” and “Saint Paul,” have not been so popular among recent progressive Christians. “Horrors!” some of us might say! Surely, we do not mean to be touting obnoxious or simplistic conversion practices! Many 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 argue that 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.

Today, however, I want to counteract those two sorts of criticism, and to rescue those two images: “conversion” and “Saint Paul.” First of all, something really happened to Saul. We have just heard the dramatic story of how Saul changed his life, how Saul became Paul. The word, “conversion” is not actually used in this lesson from the Book of Acts. But it is a word worth using.

Conversion is a good thing. Maybe we are skeptical because we have seen “converts” who embarrass the Christian faith. They seem rigid and unkind, angry and racist. I certainly admit, sadly, that some Christians have been converted to a rather simplistic, and even violent, definition of what Christianity is. A wrong definition.

But true conversion is something else. True conversion to the Spirit of Christ, is a deeply spiritual and deeply necessary phenomenon. It is a conversion to grace, and a transformation to truth, and those things can cost a lot. And true conversion is always, always, a conversion to the future, not to the past.

Conversion is not conservative; conversion is progressive! True conversion is what drives the engine of world progress. Think, for instance, about the theory of evolution. People had to have their minds changed, they had to be converted, to believe in the scientific theory of evolution. Without people willing to be converted, we would have no honoring of the work of Charles Darwin. Think of astronomy and the sun and the planets. 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!

Right. I am not speaking of being converted backwards, into some worldview that simply repeats the errors of history. I mean being converted forwards, into the future, into an entirely new way of seeing the world. Many of us today need to be

converted to something new! To a vision of true unity, for instance, where there is neither male nor female, neither Gentile nor Jew, neither Muslim nor Christian, neither black nor white. Hey! That's what Saint Paul saw!

The tragedy for much of Christianity is our believing that faith is static, stuck in only one context and generation. What a tragedy! Conversion is implicit and necessary in the *ongoing* life of Christians; once we are converted, the Christian Church has to be converted over and over again. Yes, if we are to model grace to the world, we will model how to be converted – how to change, gracefully, over and over again.

Conversion is a good thing, but it does hurt. When Paul described this experience later in the Book of Acts, he added that Jesus told him, “It hurts you to kick against the goads,” (in Acts 26). Do you know what a “goad” was? It was an instrument that prodded the ox to go forward, to keep on going. It was like a cattle prod.

In the first century, the persecutor Saul was stuck, was facing backwards, trying to retain something that was bound to change – that is, the old way of getting right with God by following stifling laws. The goads of Jesus were trying to get Paul to turn around and go forward!

So it is that the Spirit of God can seem like an annoyance to us. We kick against her impulse. We insist on resistance. We even persecute, as Saul did. We do evil to others, trying to resist the Spirit of God. But that Spirit is a persevering hound. The poet, Francis Thompson, called that Spirit “the hound of heaven.”

Yes, even after conversion, Saint Paul was like every one of us. He probably retained some old mindsets. No matter what our conversion, we do 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.

But he did turn forward! For instance, when Saint Paul appointed the leader of the first Christian church in what is now Europe, that person was a woman! The first person in Europe to host a Christian church community in her home was Lydia, in Philippi. Thus, St. Paul deserves some 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.”)

Ultimately, however, 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 like the maturity of each of us, no matter what our original and overwhelming encounter with God was. It took Paul years to learn from the goading that the Spirit was prodding him with.

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 are what Paul came to recognize as “law.” “Law” was his own Jewish concept, to be sure, but the concept can be translated into any human culture or religion.

That is his genius. Paul's psychological discovery can be translated into any religion or institution or mindset. This is what he discovered. He knew that our communities of faith develop customs and behaviors that are good for us, and the customs are 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 that law—whatever it is—but we are saved by Christ. Paul himself had to give up; he had to give up trying to prove himself. He could be saved only by “Christ,” what we might call the liberating grace of God. Faith in Christ, then, is 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 freedom. Saint Paul was converted to the realization that Jesus Christ came to set us free – free from any principle or law or expectation that keeps us in bondage. Over and over again. Free to be in union with an overwhelming God of love.

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

AMEN.

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