

THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL  
Acts 9:1-20  
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What are we to make of St. Paul's famous conversion experience on the road to Damascus - of his falling to earth and hearing a heavenly voice, of his seeing a bright light and his subsequent blindness?

What makes Paul's conversion unusual, if still unclear (there are five accounts, diverging in detail) is that his was not that of a profligate (like St. Augustine) converted to a life of virtue, but the conversion of an exceedingly devout person from one set of convictions to another. Within him, two sets of convictions were in such radical opposition that he had to "burn what he had adored, and adore what he had burned."

Paul (Saul) had grown up with a deep attachment to the Temple, to the Law, and to the People. To a Jew of such intense, unswerving loyalties, Christianity among Jews -- and all of the first Christians were Jews -- could only appear as an insidious form of national apostasy. How could any serious Jew believe that God's Anointed One was to be found in the person of a criminal, handed over by the religious authorities of the nation to the Romans, to die what could only be regarded as an accursed death? But the more Paul dragged off those Christian men and women to prison and breathed "threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," the more he himself seemed to be led into tortures of self-examination. He must have asked how his religious faith could, indeed, justify the pain he inflicted upon his victims. And almost as painful must have been this question: "Why does not my unremitting obedience to the Law that Moses brought to Israel bring peace to my soul?"

To the latter question, Paul's best answer is given in the 7th chapter of his letter to the Romans. There, he says that the Law, though good in every respect, was paradoxically the condemnation of such as knew it. None could observe its every precept. By its prohibitions, and in particular by its prohibitions of certain desires, it stimulated those very desires. The Law, far from saving us, could only underscore how far we had fallen short. So the Law was, as he wrote, "holy, just and good," and at the same time, it spelled death, not life, to the human race.

He agonized for every human being when he wrote, "The good that I would, I do not, and that which I would not, that I do." The solution in modern pietistic parlance, is to "let go and let God," to recognize, as did, St. Paul, quoting Habbakuk, that "the righteous shall live by faith."

Stop striving endlessly to be more and more virtuous, to separate yourself from the impurities of the world. It won't work; human beings are not perfectible. Those who are convinced that human nature is perfectible simply show how little they have tried to live out their own convictions. Actually, the more you strive to be perfect, the more you realize your shortcomings. The more you realize your shortcomings, the more you dislike yourself. The more you hate yourself, the less you can love others, for love is a gift of yourself. How will you make a gift of that which you hate?

"The righteous shall live by faith." The righteous, as Paul came to see, will accept their

acceptance at the hands of God. What converts a sinner to a saint is sheer forgiveness, which is always there; for while we never succeed, "there is no failure in Christ," as the gospel song goes.

Forgiveness alone makes love possible. As long as we feel rejected by God, we cannot love God or anyone else. For God appears oppressive -- as one who judges according to God's commandments and condemns according to God's wrath. But if we receive what God offers without condition -- that is, forgiveness -- then God's power enters into us like a healing stream of fire, reaffirming us, igniting our gratitude and our love for God, for one another and for all of life. Remember, to love God is not to hate life, but to try to bring love to life everywhere in life.

When you know you are loved by God, you can love others without being sure of their answering love. When you know you are loved by God, you can accept yourself, warts and all. If you reject God's love, and try to be righteous, not by faith but by virtue, listen carefully, and you too will hear the voice of Jesus, saying, as to Paul, "Tom, Bob, Sarah, Jean, why do you persecute me?"

The righteousness of virtue is cold, unwarmed by love, self-assured, like that of Paul before his conversion. The more you are forgiven, the more you love. The less you are forgiven, the less you love. And if you feel no need of forgiveness, God help all the rest of us.

There is another aspect to Paul's conversion experience that should not be overlooked. Paul converted from Pharisaic Judaism to universal Christianity. Prophetic Judaism, as opposed to pharisaic Judaism, was universal as well as national. But at the time of Christ and Paul, the adherence to the Law, the Roman occupation and the legacy of hatred that the Maccabean struggle bequeathed to posterity, all these caused the national aspect to predominate.

But something in Paul must have longed for conversion to a larger vision. He, of course, knew these words of God delivered to Isaiah: "I have been found by those who did not seek me. I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me," as well as God's condemnation of Israel, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people." (Romans 10: 20,21)

If it is hard to be converted from the fear of God to the love of God, it is no less difficult to be converted from "God loves me and mine, but not them and theirs," to Paul's understanding that God loves all as if all were but one.

But the most eloquent spokesperson for a broad, open theology of God's inclusive love is none other than the man who began his journey at the opposite end of the theological spectrum, the Apostle Paul. Paul was an expert in religious exclusivism and triumphalism. He was a Jew, a Pharisee in fact, an expert in keeping and interpreting the law of Moses. He was so zealous in his faith that he attacked and hounded and persecuted the followers of Jesus. In fact, he was on his way to Damascus to root out Christians and have them imprisoned when he was knocked off his horse and blinded and turned around by God, a remarkable conversion if there ever was one. And then, the scholars tell us, he began a theological journey from narrow exclusivism to a broad, open, grace filled theology of the cross, which finally concluded, amazingly, that God's purpose in Jesus Christ is as big as the world itself. God sent Jesus, not

just to save a few fortunate ones who happened to be lucky enough to hear the news and believe it, but to heal and restore and redeem the whole creation.

Paul began as a Pharisee — proud of his exclusive ethnic and religious identity, with an enormous wall of tradition and rules and laws and rituals to protect him from others — and by the time of his death he was saying and writing things like:

“In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... He is our peace ... he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

The biggest dividing wall in his world was religious/ethnic, Jews and Gentiles. His own faith tradition was clear about who was in and who was out. Circumcision was the sign. But there was something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that wouldn't stay behind that dividing wall. Gentiles kept responding, kept wanting to be numbered in this new thing, this wonderful inclusive new phenomenon that was happening, this new humanity. So Paul, you have to believe — reluctantly, objecting and arguing all the way — finally comes all the way around and concludes that in Christ, God is creating a new humanity, one new humanity, is healing all the wounds, all the violence, and making one new humankind of all those who are separated and divided and at war. It's bold, brave, bracing theology and it is grounded in the cross. That's what the cross is about, Paul teaches: not a narrow symbol of an exclusive religion but in Bishop Tutu's wonderful image, Christ with arms flung wide to gather in and embrace the whole world.

There are serious implications in that. It's not for the meek, for those who need a wall to hide behind. It means coming out from behind the wall actually ... a cherished theological wall of exclusivism for instance.

I loved reading an item in Martin Marty's newsletter CONTEXT by Jesuit priest, Richard Lawrence. Lawrence remembers a story his mother told him about the traditional Catholic doctrine of Limbo — Limbo is a kind of special purgatory for unbaptized babies where they repose, not suffering, but not in heaven either — because they aren't baptized. When his mother was in sixth grade in her Baltimore parish she was called on to recite the catechism question and answer about Limbo. She refused. “No, Ma'am, I won't ... I don't believe it.” “What gives you the right not to believe what's in the catechism?” the teacher asked and she replied, “Well, I wouldn't keep a little baby out of heaven over something it had no control over, and I can't believe that God is any dumber or meaner than me.”

That was the end of her religious education, Father Lawrence says, and too bad, because she was a pretty good theologian. Her lifelong litmus test for any religious teaching was two questions:

1. If this were true, what kind of person would God be?
2. How does it match up with the God Jesus teaches us about?

Marty concludes that God certainly is not meaner than Father Lawrence's mother.  
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So sometimes we have to come out from behind the walls we have built and which are providing us, we think, security and safety and identity, because God calls us out, call us to live in the marvelous freedom of his unconditional love.

The God Jesus taught about doesn't seem to know about boundaries and walls, doesn't seem to exclude anyone from his love and acceptance and grace: sinners, cheaters, prostitutes, children, women, sick, unclean, adulterers — all the ones who live their lives on the other side of the wall of religious exclusivism — find their way into his presence and to a place at his table. That's what God's up to in the world, St. Paul is saying, creating that stunning new humanity.

One of my favorite phrases from scripture comes from the Parable of the Prodigal Son, "when he came to himself." My wish has been and remains, that we might all, like the Prodigal Son, come to ourselves, that we might, like Paul, regain our sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit, realizing that our individual salvation lies not in being sinless but in accepting forgiveness God always offers in Christ; and that the salvation of this planet lies in understanding that just as God loves each as if God had naught else to care for, so God loves all, as if all were but one. Thanks be to God. Amen.