

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Acts 9:1-31 **“Power To Turn Enemies Into Friends”**

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(Epiphany)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

ACTS 9:1-31 "POWER TO TURN ENEMIES INTO FRIENDS"

Told 3x: 9:1-31 (Narrator), 22:3-21, 26:9-18 + Gal. 1:11-17

I. 9:1-25 PAUL THE PERSECUTOR: HIS VISION AND ESCAPE. 5 PARTS: CONVERSION STORY

Christophany/Choice/Commission For Mission Of 13-28

A. vv.1-2 Paul Persecutes Christians: "disciples," "murder." //7:58, 8:1-3, 26:10-11, 1 Cor. 9:1, 15:9

1 But Saul, still breathing threats and MURDER against THE DISCIPLES of the LORD, (1) CONTEXT, 9:1-2
2 went to the high priest and asked for letters to the synagogue at Damascus, 31/32 AD, 2 Cor. 3:1, 135 Miles N. Acts 22:5
so that if he found any belonging to The Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Zeal, Gal. 1:14
2 Names, Power Encounter: Conquest Narrative, Archenemy

B. vv.3-7 Paul Confronted By The Risen Jesus: 2 Questions. (2a) CATALYST: Vision, 9:3

3 Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, 1 Cor. 9:1, 15:5-8, Power Encounter, Vision 1
Vision 1 and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. His Initiative! //22:2-6, 26:13, 1 Sam. 3:4, Reduplication
4 Q1 And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? //Ex. 3:4
5 Q2 And he said, "Who are you, LORD?" And he said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting; //Lk. 10:16
6 but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." (2b) CATALYST: Audition, 9:4-6
7 The men who were standing with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. //Jn. 12:27-29
Paul Was Opposing God! //Gal. 1:13-16

Obedience 1 C. vv.8-9 Paul Is Obedient: He Does Not See Or Eat. 26:14, Image Of Powerlessness

8 Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; //13:11, 9:27
so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. (2c) CATALYST, Interim, 9:8-9
9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Time Of Preparation/ Repentance
Is. 42:16, 26:7, 35:5, Jer. 14:12, Neh. 1:4, Jon. 3:7-8

D. vv.10-12 Jesus And Ananias 1: Command And Reason, "For". Vision 2

10 1 Now there was a DISCIPLE at Damascus named Ananias. 2nd Christophany: Same Parts
Vision 2 The LORD said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said to him, "Here I am, LORD."
11 And the LORD said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, Command
and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; First Mention Of Home
12 2 for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Ananias come in. Visions 2-3
Vision 3 and lay his hands on him so that he might receive his sight." Miracle //22:12-16
(3) COUNTER-FORCE/RESISTANCE, 9:10-16

E. vv.13-14 Ananias' Protest: Recounts "A" (//8:3, 9:1).

13 But Ananias answered, "LORD, I have heard from many about this man:
14 how much evil he has done to thy saints in Jerusalem; Honest Fears
and how he has authority to bind all who call upon thy name." //2:21
Disciples, Saints, Way, Brothers, Church

D' vv.15-16 Jesus And Ananias 2: Command And Reason, "For". Call A Prophet

15 1 But the LORD said to him, "Go! for he is a chosen instrument (vessel) of mine Command
to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; //1:8, 26:16-18
16 2 for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 5:41, Reason
Missions Commissioning: Call To Apostleship

Obedience 2, 3 C' vv.17-19a Ananias Is Obedient: Paul Sees And Eats. 10 Conversions In Acts

17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him, he said,
Healing/Filling "Brother Saul, the LORD Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, Community
has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Healing/ Filling (13:9)
18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight Tob. 11:11-14
19 Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened. (4) CONVERSION, 9:17-19
Full Ritual Acceptance, 22:16

B' vv.19b-22 Paul Confronts Others With Jesus The Messiah: 2 Questions. //4:16-30

b For several days he was with the DISCIPLES at Damascus. (5) POST-CONVERSION EVIDENCE, 9:19b-30
20 And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the SON OF GOD." Fulfill v.15//13:33
21 And all who heard him were amazed, and said, (a) Preaching Jesus, 20-22, 28b-29a (Fulfills v.15)
Q1 "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name?" Gal. 1:13, 23
Q2 And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests."
22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, Spirit's Power, I Chr. 12:18, Judg. 6:34 (LXX)
and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the CHRIST. 28:23, Use Learning
Titles: Lord (7x), Son of God, Christ

A' vv.23-25 Paul Is Persecuted As A Christian: "Kill," "Disciples." 3yrs, Gal. 1:17, Situation Reversed

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to KILL him, v.16, (b) Suffers Persecution: 9:23-25, 29b-30
24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night to kill him; Fulfills v.16, 2 Cor. 11:32
25 but his DISCIPLES took him by night and let him down over the wall, lowering him in a basket. c) Xn Community

II. 9:26-31 PAUL THE PREACHER: HIS ACCEPTANCE IN JERUSALEM AND ESCAPE.

Reassurance For The Mother Church In Jerusalem

Geo Shift **A. v.26 Paul Resisted: "disciple."** Is This A Genuine Conversion?

26 And when he had come to Jerusalem
he attempted to join **THE DISCIPLES**;
and they were all afraid of him,
for they did not believe that he was **A DISCIPLE**.
Paul Was Converted Jesus, Ananias To Paul, Paul To The Church
//Fears Of Ananias, Evidence Confirms Conversion
Mt. 7:15 For Standard

27 **B. v.27 Bold Preaching In Damascus.** Paul Has Experience; Needs Apostolic Verification
But Barnabus took him, and brought him to the apostles, **Introduced Earlier In 4:36-37, Partners In Acts 11-15**
and declared to them how on the road he had seen the LORD, **Visual + Audio**
who spoke to him,
and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. **Thus, His Conversion Is Genuine**
Paul Converted From Non-Messianic To Messianic Judaism

28 **B' vv.28-29 Bold Preaching In Jerusalem.** Christ Has Changed Enemy To Ally, Transformation
So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, **Paul's Vivid Experience Validated By Apostolic Tradition**
preaching boldly in the name of the LORD. **//9:15, Tradition And Experience Necessary For Adequate Witness**
29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; **Greek-Speaking Synagogue Of Freedmen, 6:9**
but they were seeking to kill him. **Group He Formerly Conspired With, 6:9-14**

A' vv.30-31 Paul Supported/ Defended: "brethren." Summary Statement. Paul Is Trouble!
30 And when **THE BRETHREN** knew it, **Divine Providence/Protection: Echoes Ananias, 9:17b**
Geo Shift they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus. **Back To His Home City, Recalled By Barnabas 11:25**

III. 9:31 LUCAN SUMMARY: CHURCH STATUS REPORT.

31 1 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace **1:8, Now That Paul Was Gone!**
2 and was built up, **Summary, No Persecution!**
3 and walking in the fear of the Lord
4 and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit
5 it was multiplied. **p.v. = by God, Lk.'s Idealized Report**
Paul's Conversion Is From One Form Of Judaism To Another (Messianist) By Addition From Revelation
Hesselgrave's Five Stages Of Conversion

In his book *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), David Hesselgrave points to several stages which generally occur in authentic Christian conversion. Believers wanting to win others to Christ should see that they are trying to assist people to complete a process which Hesselgrave outlines with alliteration:

1. **Discovery**
"There is a person called Christ whom the true God is said to have sent into the world to be the Savior and Lord of human beings."
2. **Deliberation**
"Should I forsake my old ways and follow Christ?"
3. **Determination**
"I will repent and believe in Christ."
4. **Dissonance**
"Forces are trying to draw me back to the old ways. Shall I resist them and continue to follow Christ?"
5. **Discipline**
"I will identify with the people of Christ in His church. I will live in submission to His lordship and church discipline."

Thus, the point in time when a person acknowledges Christ as Savior may be very specific. However, the path leading to that point may have been a long one. A praying mother, a godly professor, a Christian book, a dramatic play, a loving friend, a personal crisis . . . all may have played a part in that person coming to the decision to repent and accept Christ's lordship. (I Corinthians 3:5-10; John 4:34-38).

POWER TO TURN ENEMIES INTO FRIENDS

“... and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.”

What happens when God pulls the trigger on his prey.

ACTS 9:3b

Conversion is in the news these days.¹ It’s no longer just a interesting subject of academic inquiry but a matter of domestic security. How do you explain it when a young man or woman, growing up with the privileges and opportunities of living in a liberal western democracy, heads off to Syria to join ISIS and their holy war to establish a Caliphate and lead the world to Allah and sharia law at gun point?

Perhaps the grandfather was an immigrant from Pakistan in the last 1940s, a moderate Muslim who learned English, got a job near London, did the best he could to fit in his new world. He was glad to live in the West where the individual, freedom of speech, and the rule of law mattered. Or, as we Americans affirm: *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. Here a man could make something of himself apart from family and tribe. Playing cricket with the local club was a bridge between his old world and his new home, as was the symbol of the Queen. His son Parvez, born in 1955, never knew the old world, loved the Beatles and the Stones, smoked weed with his mates, and was— by adulthood— pretty much a secular British citizen, except for the dark skin which marked him out as a child of the Commonwealth. Fitting in was his top priority, and he was proud to be the first in his family to attend university. A degree in Finance helped him land a good job in Manchester with a consulting group. When the four of them returned to Lahore in 1970 to visit family for the first time in twenty years, his parents fit with the old ways and language; Parvez and his sister did not. It was a strange new world, but it would not be without future influence.

One day in 2010 his nineteen year old son did not come home. A missing

¹ A good place to begin is Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1993).

person report was filed, and within a week they learned John had crossed the border from Turkey to Syria carrying a British passport on his way to join ISIS. He had been converted; *radicalized* is the term we now use. He'd moved from 21st century Britain back across time to a radical commitment to a 7th century form of the same faith his grandfather quietly practiced and his father abandoned in favor of Western secularism. It started with the Internet and a new college friend who was serious about his religion. John had no faith of his own except himself as the center of his own little world. He'd never read the Koran or Hadith and only been to mosque several times when he visited his grandfather who always retreated from the family room to take out his prayer rug and kneel in the direction of Mecca. He remembers the day his new friend looked him in the eye, "You are not one of these Brits; you're a lost son of Allah. It's time you learned to worship the true God of your ancestors and follow the prophet Muhammed. You were meant for more than sex and alcohol and music and clubbing and a career in money like your father *the infidel*."

It was hard to hear, but it struck deep and rang true in his heart, and through he never grew a beard and changed his clothing till he left, it was new friends and reading the Koran and listening to fiery imams on the Internet that led him to a secret new identity and then his sudden flight to Syria. He saw how empty his life was, how weak the moral influence of the British church was on an essentially secular culture, and how recovering the faith of his ancestors make him a man of courage and purpose.² It was good to have a cause and new family with common practices and strict disciplines. He felt like a man for the first time, but how could he share the new discovery with his parents? He could not. Instead he became a man of action and headed for the front lines. For months afterward his mother wept and fell into a depression that required intervention; his father looked constantly bewildered and drank heavily; his sister made solemn promises not to follow her older brother, though in secret she admired him and sometimes wore a scarf when away from her parents as a sign of modesty that she was not like the other loose girls in her class.

² My fiction is not far off the mark according to the report "Tackling Muslim Radicalization: Lessons from Scotland," [www.ispu.org/pdfs/ISPU%20-%20Radicalization%20 Report](http://www.ispu.org/pdfs/ISPU%20-%20Radicalization%20Report); Katherine Brown, Tania Saeed, "Radicalization and counter-radicalization at British universities: Muslim encounters and alternatives," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2014), www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2014.911343.

After several months they received a picture attached to an email that was hardly recognizable. The clothes, the hair, the beard, the rifle. “How could this have happened to John and we not know it?” A local mental health center formed a support group for parents of radicalized adult children, but since they were not allowed to deal with faith issues, no one could answer the Why? question. John lived a year. After the explosion there was nothing to bury. His last words, as reported by observers, were *Allahu Akbar!* John was a hero in his new world, a complete mystery at home. We forget young people need meaning and a worthy cause, not just stuff and fun; they want to make a difference. Modern, self-indulgent, secularism does not satisfy a hungry soul. Could it be we don’t offer enough challenge and discipline?

Conversion is not just a Christian thing; it’s a human thing, the capacity to have a change of loyalties and worldview. What makes it Christian is the source and object of the change, the risen Jesus Christ, not just the process. Conversion is preceded by a compression process and followed by an assimilation process where the new life is worked out, but at some point there’s a tipping point when a motivating insight comes, when a new identity is triggered and a new reference group joined.³ There are minor conversions— say from on brand loyalty to another, and there are moderate conversions with more implications— say from one political party to another, and there are major conversions from one religion or life philosophy and world view to another. In each case there are tremors before and shakings after the event itself. The landscape of life changes and the script of life is rewritten from a new perspective.⁴ In some cases an inherited childhood faith becomes living faith, as it did for me in the summer of ‘72 when I was eighteen and standing at a crossroads. I kept my Methodist attachments, but my identity shifted from cultural

³ The conversion process finds parallels in the shift of scientific paradigms as outlined in Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edition, (Chicago, ILL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996). Whatever the inputs are, conversion has both a context and a community, a process and a turning point— or perhaps several.

⁴ Scott McKnight has written, “If a person tells their own story in a new way, then a conversion has occurred. Conversion then is determined by whether or not a person rewrites their own story: if they don’t, no conversion; if they do, conversion” (www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/03/03). For a full treatment, see his *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories of Conversion and Apostasy* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2008).

church member to a disciple of Jesus within the church, from a good family habit to a follower of a new and powerful Savior, and on that path I have stayed.

But it also works in the other direction: *de-conversion*. Christians become atheists; believers become skeptics; *somes* become *nones*.⁵ There are lots of spiritual drifters out there, many not quite knowing *what they are* but very clear about *what the aren't* and resisting every label except the current favorite: *spiritual but not religious*. Conversions can be within the Christian faith— say Baptists to Methodist as close cousins, or Evangelicals to Roman Catholic as more distant family,⁶ or between faiths— say Hindu to Muslim, or Wiccan paganism to Christian theism— as I have personally observed,⁷ or from one of these to no faith at all,⁸ which is itself a faith because life cannot be lived without some center of loyalty, even if it's only me!

For years as a pastor involved in world missions I've delighted to read the stories of Muslims who've come to faith in Jesus Christ beginning with dreams in the night, which are highly valued in some cultures as means of divine revelation. But as of late an even more highly-charged narrative has begun to emerge concerning the work of the risen Jesus among radical Islamists. In a story released in October

“... a Muslim fighter told Christian Aid Mission staffers in Amman, Jordan, that he came to kill them after learning his relatives were among the refugees given aid. Upon seeing fellow Muslims treated with kindness, he postponed. The next day he came to the director and told

⁵ “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” Pew Research Center, Oct. 12, 2012, www.pewforum.org/files/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise.

⁶ Scott McKnight, “From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals Become Roman Catholics,” JETS, 45/3 (September 2002) 451-72.

⁷ On the multiple forms of conversion in the ancient world, see Charles Talbert, *Reading Acts* (New York, NY: Crossway, 1997), 96ff.

⁸ Here I recommend the remarkable book of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Heretic: Why Islam Needs A Reformation Now* (New York, NY: Harper, 2015) who left fundamentalist Islam for non-belief and protest. Her books have set me off on a new course of study.

of a dream he had the night before. “Last night I saw Jesus, and I want to know what are you teaching. Who is this One who held me up from killing you?” The missionaries then introduced him to the teachings of Christ. After receiving compassion of the Christian missionaries, the former jihadist embraced Christ. The director said, “He received Christ with tears, and today he's helping in the church, helping out other people. We're praying for lots of such *Sauls* to change to *Pauls*.”

This jihadist followed in the steps of another who had change of heart after dreaming of Jesus last June, according to Gina Fadely of Youth With A Mission:

“A jihadist approached and said he’d begun having dreams of this *man in white* who said, ‘You are killing my people.’ The fighter said that just before he killed one Christian, the man said, ‘I know you will kill me, but I give to you my Bible.’ The Christian was killed; the ISIS fighter took the Bible and began to read it,” Fadely said. He then dreamed of Jesus again who asked him to follow Him. The dream was so powerful he did as he was told. Now the former scourge of Christians has become a follower of Christ.” The interviewer writes, “What many people don't realize is that despite the ongoing persecution of Christians, there is an unprecedented spiritual hunger among Muslims. Many people are now following Jesus but keep it quiet. They have church in their home.”⁹

When I came across this story last summer I was angry. What about the man he killed who gave him a Bible? Then I remembered another persecutor of believers whose turnaround begins with these words:

“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

⁹ Edited, awdnews.com/top-news/isis-terrorist-follows-jesus-after-encountering-him-in-dream. See Tim Tennent, “The Hidden History of Insider Movements,” Christianity Today online, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february.

Saul’s life is about to be interrupted by the same Jesus he saw as a false Messiah. A dead fraud was about to be seen as the living Lord as Saul was blinded by the light of new revelation. Eventually healed and commissioned, but in between were three days of darkness and hunger, prayer and thinking, waiting and repentance. Saul the persecutor had been reduced to sitting in the dark trying to rethink literally everything he believed. “If this is true,” he must have asked, “how could I have been so wrong?” Such is the confusion of conversion. I’m still working out the implications of what happened to me forty-three years ago. Life with Jesus is untidy.

For adults and adolescents, conversion is *from something* and *for something*. The deeper the *from* dimension, the stronger the emotional convulsion and ripping away; the higher the *for* dimension, the stronger and longer the mission that flows from it. To admit that the crucified Jesus was alive with the undying life of God and that in him alone the God of Israel had personally shown his face was a revolutionary insight for a highly-trained Jewish scholar like Saul. It was not something he figured out but something dumped on him— rather rudely I might add— in divine revelation. The inner life of the one God of Israel was more complex than Paul imagined. Not just *the One God Yahweh* in solitary splendor but the one God in *the three persons*, a unity of communion: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To say that Jesus is *Lord* is to apply to him the Old Testament title for the one God. To call him *the Son of God* is to claim he is the one who perfectly represents the Father’s authority in his mission.¹⁰ Saul always remained a Jew; he didn’t change religions, and he always had two names.¹¹ It was not an inter-faith conversion but a conversion within Judaism that gave Paul a new center in the person of Messiah Jesus. Jesus perfectly represents the One who sent him as a Son does a Father on a business matter in the Middle East; to deal with the Son is to deal with the Father; they are transparent to one another.

But now, because of an unexpected personal encounter on the way to

¹⁰ Classic teaching is that the *Son* is not inferior to the *Father* in dignity or deity but subordinate for the mission. *Son* is a revealed metaphor for personal agency.

¹¹ For a listing of the evidence, see John McRay, *Paul: His Life And Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 50-52. For a full treatment, see N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God, Parts I and II* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2013), Chapter 15, “To Know The Place For The First Time,” 1408-1472.

Damascus, Saul was forced to incorporate the history of Jesus into his understanding of God’s person and to rethink everything in light of this revelation given to Jesus’ first followers and now to him in a parallel encounter. Saul and other early Jewish Christians experienced God as Triune long before the church worked out the mature doctrine of the Trinity. That took three hundred more years. Same God: Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but now with a new relational complexity revealed. The Father is *Lord*, Jesus is also *Lord*, as is the Holy Spirit. That was the substance of Saul’s conversion, a conversion within Judaism that incorporates all that happened in Jesus. “So who is our God?” a fellow Jew might ask. “Well,” Saul would say, “God is like Jesus, and the risen Jesus is now with us through his Spirit.”

Falling in love is a kind of conversion in which another person becomes the center of ones affections. Phil’s life is now rearranged around Lori, and every time I retell the story of how we met I feel the wonder again! And what comes out of conversions are testimonials, “I *once* was lost *but now* am found, was blind *but now* I see.” “I *used* to have iron poor blood and no energy, *but now* I take Geritol and have vim, vigor, and vitality!” When you hear *then-and-now* language, you’re dealing with conversion. It’s the aim of politics, of marketing, of Christian faith. We are a religion of conversion. Sometimes it’s the gradual nurtured conversions of those who can truly say they never remember a time Jesus was not present in life, sometimes cataclysmic ones like Paul’s that intimidate the rest of us with its intensity. The church is an experimental laboratory for the transformation of life by Jesus Christ. We make nothing happen; we witness, and then watch everything happen.

The Bible is full of conversions, none more noteworthy than what happened to Saul of Tarsus. F.F. Bruce wrote that “no single event, apart from the Christ-event itself, has proved so determinant for the course of Christian history as the conversion and commissioning of Paul.”¹² His conversion and call are so important they are told three times in the Book of Acts, each with a bit different spin.¹³ Over half the of Acts

¹² Quoted in McRay, *Paul: His Life And Teaching*, 11.

¹³ Acts 9:1-31, 22:6-16, 26:12-18. For analyses, see Beverly Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament*, chapter 2, “Why Do You Persecute Me,” (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986), 52-95; Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, chapter 4, “Conversion and Its Consequences,” (Oxford: Clarendon

is devoted to Paul and his missionary journeys. Thirteen of twenty-one New Testament letters are from his hand or those of his followers. The spread of Christian faith to Asia Minor and all of Greece was largely his work. Jesus is the personal origin for the rise of Christian faith as messianic Judaism, but it is to Paul that we owe the foundations of Christian doctrine as our first, great theologian. And the key turning point in his life, that to which all moved and from which all flowed, was a series of events that occurred over a three day period as he was on a search-and-destroy mission against *The Way*, which is what we were then called.

THE INITIAL ENCOUNTER (vv.1-9)

The man has a resume. Tribe of Benjamin, best Jewish education of the day, a Pharisee, a strict Jewish layman, multi-lingual Roman citizen, agent of the Jerusalem council with a special portfolio for rounding up deviants who claimed that a Nazarene tradesman and preacher— one Jesus, only recently crucified as a messianic imposter, was the promised Messiah. How stupid and how dangerous is that? So Saul broke into homes, hauled them off, and watched over the cloaks of those who stoned the first Christian martyr, Stephen.¹⁴ He was accessory to religious murder, not much different from the camera man who filmed the beheading of twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christian martyrs in February last year. He was not content with policing Jerusalem, but sought warrants from the high priest because he heard followers of *The Way* had infected synagogues a hundred and thirty miles away.

Press, 1996), 71-95; Joel Green, “Conversion in the Narrative of Luke-Acts,” in Kenneth Collins and John Tyson, editors, *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2001), 103-118; Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), Part I, “The Experience of St. Paul,” 17-104. The commentaries of Charles Talbert, *Reading Acts* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1992), Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1992), Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), J. Bradley Chance, *Acts* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), Mikeal Parsons, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), and Ekhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012) contain full treatments of the issues.

¹⁴ Acts 7:58-8:3.

Saul thought he was doing God a favor; he was in fact opposed to God, and in the blunt words of Peter Wagner, “...under the power of the enemy who had come to steal, kill, and destroy.”¹⁵ Sincerity, zeal, tradition, and knowledge are not themselves a guarantee of truth. Every religious group has the right to police its boundaries and to decide what is kosher in doctrine and practice and what is not. Even we hyper-tolerant United Methodists have doctrinal standards and a list of behaviors that can get you brought before church courts, as we do each year with errant clergy. But when such zeal and hatred as Saul’s overshadows any sense of human compassion, you may be sure the Evil One is at work. Saul did not know it, but he was walking into a divine ambush. Flannery O’Conner once quipped, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.”¹⁶ Gentle Jesus can play hardball with hardheads. It’s not until many are flat on their backs that they ponder, “Lord, is that you ruining my life?”

What happened was not a product of imagination, not the sudden onset of a migraine headache, not a psychotic break. Others with him perceived part of the encounter but not the whole; there was an objectivity about it. All of a sudden he was enveloped in a light that flashing like lightning. We think of heaven as up and away, but the abode of God is not distant, only hidden. The Father simply drew back the veil and allowed the glory of the risen Jesus to impact Paul. He fell to the ground under the weight of divine presence. It helps me to remember that the risen Jesus is not far way, just beyond sight, and that he remains the prime actor.

With the vision came a sound track with his name repeated for emphasis and a question that set his mind reeling, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

“Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

In that moment his world crumbled. It would take decades of thought and missionary experience to work out the implications of that brief dialog, but two

¹⁵ *Lighting the Word: Acts Nine Through Fifteen* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 21.

¹⁶ Quoted in Ronald Witherup, *Conversion In The New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1994), 65.

conclusions were immediately clear: 1) Jesus is not dead but very much alive; therefore his followers were right; Jesus is Lord, the one God vindicated after death; and 2) To touch them is to touch him, so closely are the founder and his followers identified. Jesus apparently takes what we do to his church as done to him. Wound them, you deal with him. He loves his broken people; it cost him to obtain them.

Divine grace does not undermine human personality; it frees it from the compulsion of sin and the grip of evil to face a choice: Will I accept the new life Jesus offers?¹⁷ But it was clear who would now be giving orders and who obeying, “Rise and enter the city, and you will *be told* what to do.” Saul’s life would no longer be self-directed. Preachers across the years have taken great delight in this reversal where the wolf becomes a lamb. John Stott writes: “He who had expected to enter Damascus in the fullness of his pride and prowess, as a self-confident opponent of Christ, was actually led into it, humbled and blinded, a captive of the very Christ he had opposed.”¹⁸ Saul had been busted by a dead man he hated. As he was dying under the blows of the stones, with Saul taking care of the cloaks, Stephen— the first martyr— prayed as Jesus did, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Saint Augustine wrote, “The church owes Saint Paul to the prayers of Stephen.”¹⁹

ANANIAS: A FAITHFUL BROTHER (vv.10-19a)

Those of us trained in scientific cultures tend to be suspicious of the mystical and are not quite sure what to do with visions and dreams. They are more common than we’ve been led to believe, and in other parts of the world are taken for granted as means of divine guidance. Giving the external world authority as we do, we look for God to order outward circumstances by providence, and he does. We speak of doors closing and windows opening. To others the inner world and the invisible world are

¹⁷ For an Arminian/Wesleyan read on these issues, see Don Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley: Bringing Beliefs In Line With Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2013), especially Chapter 4, “Grace: More Preventive Than Irresistible,” 44-57.

¹⁸ John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: InterVarsity, 1990), 170.

¹⁹ Paul Pierson, *Themes from Acts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1982), 81.

equally real; they expect visions, and they come. Their doors and windows are internal. Saul and Ananias were not skeptical modern Christians but first-century Jews open to living encounters with God. They read the Scriptures not as a record of what God once did but what God might do at any time. What we expect and are open to as real has an effect on how God speaks. What we are *willing* to see affects what we *can* see. There are three visions, an infliction and healing of blindness, and a filling with the Spirit in our story. The unusual abounds in Acts chapter 9.

For three days Saul was blind and neither ate nor drank. It was a long, hard labor for Paul to be born again. All the while he was praying, crying out to God for forgiveness and understanding, and yes, also for his sight to be restored. It was then that Ananias also had a vision of Jesus who spoke in remarkable detail telling Ananias *who* and *what* and *where* and *why*. It's comical to reflect on Ananias' hesitation as he argues with the Lord, "Do you know what a bad dude this guy is? Are you asking me to risk my life for him?" Jesus listens, but again breaks the impasse with a command, "Go! For he is a chosen instrument of mine...."

Ananias is an attractive character, faithful man, available for assignments, strategically placed in Damascus, and obedient once his fears were overcome. *Watch* him take courage and go to *Straight Street*. *Hear* him utter a prayer at the doorstep and ask Judas to take him to his guest. *Feel* the compassion well up in his heart as he first views the blind, weak man before him. *Watch* him reach out his trembling hand and lay it upon Saul's head. And then those wonderful words that always move me, "*Brother Saul*." That is as much a miracle as the light on the road. "People need the Lord," the song says, but by the Lord's design *people also need people*. Conversion is deeply personal; it is never merely private. Grace does not isolate but incorporate. Jesus struck Saul down in judgment, but he did not raise him up in the same way. Instead, he sent another Christian so Saul could learn again how deeply the Lord is identified with his people. New life and a new community go together. No one becomes a believer alone, and no one stays a believer without the church.

So much is packed into verses 17 through 19: a prophecy, a healing, Christian baptism, including filling with the Holy Spirit, and the taste of food with a new friend. The power on the Damascus Road, the power in Ananias' touch, and in between those power poles three days of solitude and confusion, humility and silence hollowing out a once-proud and confident man. Like birth, conversion is often messy, painful, and leaves one exceedingly vulnerable and needy.

Conversion is just not complete apart from public identification with the church through baptism and fellowship. For every new convert there must be at least one Ananias who take risks for them. Every new born needs someone to nurse them, change their diapers, and believe in them. Practicing the obstetrics of evangelism is not enough; the church must also practice pediatrics and care for the newly born again! Follow Christ, and he will bring all sorts of helpers and encouragers across your path. You do not see it when I stand before you, but I stand on the shoulders of those who cared for, corrected, and opened opportunities for me. Dare to be an Ananias in someone’s life. New converts are exceedingly vulnerable. Their old world is over, and they don’t yet know how to live in the new. Be patient with them. They feel disoriented and are often tempted to return to the old life.

Jesus Christ never calls someone to himself without also offering them a piece of the action. With conversion comes a call to ministry, and the forms are as surprising and diverse as the conversions themselves. God is not into cloning; every saint is a custom job. I love the story of Charles Grandison Finney, the great revivalist of the 19th century. He was a lawyer. The day after being converted he spoke to one of his clients whose court date was imminent, “Deacon B., I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his case, and I cannot plead yours.”²⁰

THE PROOF AND THE PERSECUTION (vv. 20-31)

The remainder of the story in verses 20 through 31 is an interplay of three themes: Saul’s bold preaching in Damascus and Jerusalem, the skepticism of the churches, and persecution from those who were originally supporters. It’s also full of delightful ironies. One day Jesus is a man who in Paul’s mind got what he deserved, an imposter strung up on a cross, a cursed man. A few days later he is the Son of God and Messiah whom Saul preaches in the synagogues of Damascus. His postures are another: *walking* or *riding* towards Damascus, *flat* on his face, *led* by the hand, *kneeling* before Ananias, *seated* before the synagogue in the posture of a teacher, and finally *nestled* in a wicker basket sliding down a stone wall and running out of town in the dark! Coming to town for one purpose, turning the town upside down for a different purpose, then being run out of town. An enemy of the church, a member of

²⁰ C. Douglas Weaver, *A Cloud of Witnesses* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 119.

the church, a problem for the church! His old enemies become new friends and his old friends new enemies! Someone else is now running Saul's life

Same story in Jerusalem, except this time the mentor and sponsor is Barnabus instead of Ananias. All of that intellect, all of that energy and zeal, all of that commitment is now launched in service of Jesus Christ. Luke emphasizes the boldness of Saul's preaching. Ananias was right in his prophecy: Saul will preach, and he will suffer. Saul gained fresh religious experience from the risen Lord; he learned the history of Jesus from Ananias and Barnabus and the Jerusalem apostles. The church needs the energy of fresh religious experience; new converts need the stabilizing influence of the church's accumulated wisdom and proven practices.²¹ Their fire belongs in our fireplace. For Saul the Christian faith, both in his opposition and in his advocacy, was a life and death matter. One day it was *kill*, the next *be killed*. Who Jesus is or is not is still a life and death matter. The risen Lord is still the primary actor in the ongoing drama we call church, and I have never yet recovered from the well-timed arrow he shot into my heart. If he is alive, then he is available, and if he's available, *then he is here right now to do business with all who desire him! His Holy Spirit is stirring over us and giving fresh light now!*

CONCLUSION

Not all conversions are this dramatic, but some are. Jesus chooses when and how to disrupt our lives, not us. We all need him, and by his design we need one another. If you're a believer and don't have a church, you're an orphan; and if you're a disciple and don't have a mission, you're spiritually unemployed. Ask God for a family and for a job. New converts are often disruptive because they remind us of our first love. Conversion is a psychologically and socially complex phenomena. Don't ever make fun or look down on the awkwardness and ignorance of a new believer. They might be the next Paul. The center of this faith is that Jesus Christ is alive and still messin' with people, and from what I know of me and you, we all need some messin' with! How 'bout it, Lord? I know you're listening! Answer our prayer!

²¹ See Charles Talbert, *Acts* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1984), 41-43, on the mutually corrective relationship of experience and tradition as theologically symbolized in Paul and the Jerusalem twelve.
