

“A Converting Religion”
Acts 9:1-19
July 6, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

Christianity is a converting religion. At its heart, Christianity teaches that people need converting because by nature we go the wrong way, a way that destroys all that is most precious. This wrong way destroys other people and the social institutions that are here to help. Most significantly, our basic natures are self-destructive. Left alone, we are like a two-year old playing beside a swimming pool unattended. The chances are high that he will fall in and drown. Our need, therefore, is to be converted from our self-destructive ways to a better path.

A number of years ago, a full-page ad for Columbia University appeared in the *New York Times*. It advertised seven fields of study in which a person could get a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies: American Studies, Ancient Studies, East Asian Studies, Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, Medieval Studies, and South Asian Studies. Richard John Neuhaus spotted this ad and wrote an editorial about it, asking, “Where is Christian Studies?” He considers four possible reasons for this omission, and then settles on this one:

Nervousness is caused by the awareness that there are an awful lot of people who really believe in Christianity. The university is a cosmopolitan space where “religious traditions” can be subjected to critical examination but are not to be taught as though they might be, well, you know, true. Even in religious studies departments, faculty members who are Hindus, Buddhists, and believers in Mystical Crystals can quite openly profess their faith. Muslims and, usually, Jews can, too. Nobody raises a question about their “proselytizing.” Not so with Christians. The fear is that Christianity might be taken altogether too seriously. The absence of Christian Studies in the Columbia program, it turns out, is not an insult to Christianity. Those of the other faiths, however, might have reason to be offended.

The fact that Christianity is a converting religion makes it dangerous. If one gets too close to it, it is possible to find oneself captured by it. But all who are so converted are glad of the fact. The conversion of Saul is probably the most well-known conversion of all time. Luke finds it so important that he manages to write the book of Acts in such a way that the story of this conversion appears three times. Saul got close to Christianity, as an enemy of it, and found himself converted by it. The chief persecutor of the church becomes the chief apostle who will spread the good news of Jesus to the Gentile world. Let’s look more carefully at his conversion, divided along the timeline of before, during and after.

I. Saul’s Pre-Conversion Life

Saul was a determined and formidable enemy of the church. Some of the language Luke uses to describe him in his pre-conversion state portrays him as a ferocious beast. Luke had described him back in 8:3 as **“ravaging the church.”** That same verb is used in Psalm 80:13 of wild boars devastating a vineyard. His viciousness was that of a large predator like a lion attacking its prey. He says in verse 1 of this chapter that Saul was breathing threats against the church. So consumed was he with anger and hatred toward the church that it was as if every breath he exhaled was filled with a threat against the church.

Specifically, Saul was bringing Christians before the Jewish ruling council, where they would be charged with blasphemy for their claim that Jesus was the Son of God. Since Luke says he was breathing out murder, I assume that the common outcome of Saul’s action was the execution of the Christians who were bound by Saul and brought to the council. He pursued this action against Christians in Jerusalem initially, simply because there were no Christians outside of Jerusalem in the early days of the church. He had probably hoped to stamp out what he considered to be this dangerous heresy before it grew any further. The Christians in Jerusalem had been so affected by Saul’s attacks that when he showed up in Jerusalem three years after his conversion, they were still afraid of him. Saul was not successful in his attempts to extinguish Christianity in Jerusalem, and now this new religion was spreading, ironically by the very persecution Saul had a hand in launching. Now we find him traveling 135 miles to Damascus, because he had heard that there were Christians there.

Why was Saul so angry? His anger was the irrational, animal type anger. What was its source? Many people today say that such angry violence has its source in religious conviction. Religion, they say, is the problem, for which atheism is the solution. That’s not the way Saul viewed it. Years later, he wrote about this time in his life and said that his central problem was that he **“put confidence in the flesh”** (Phil. 3:3-4). What he meant by that is that he found his identity in his racial origin and in his religious accomplishments. He was a Jewish supremacist. Whenever we look for our identity to something outside of Christ, we will become angry at anything we see as a threat to that identity. We have too much invested in this thing not to be angry. Saul viewed Christians as a threat to his identity as one who scrupulously keeps the law of God. Christians were saying that Jesus is our righteousness, and that righteousness is not found in our own performance. Christianity threatened the very foundation of Paul’s life.

This is a common source of anger in our lives as well. So if someone says to me, “Brad Allison, you would never be a good art critic, because you are color-blind,” I would not be angry at all. My lack of anger would have nothing to do with the fact that this statement is completely true, but simply with the fact that I have nothing invested in being an art critic. I have not built my identity on that foundation, with the result that I don’t get angry if it is threatened. Now imagine a second scenario. The three-year-old Sunday School teacher calls the mother of little Johnny, who has become quite a behavioral problem in the class. The mother has built her identity on having perfect children. She cannot except that

her child is the problem. It must be the teacher. So she goes to the pastor to complain about this teacher, and when the pastor backs up the teacher, she angrily announces that she will not be coming back to this church. What's the difference between these two scenarios? True statements are made in both—Brad Allison is colorblind and little Johnny has become a behavioral problem. The difference is that a mother's sense of identity is being threatened in the second case, and she responds in anger. She is putting her confidence in the flesh. That's why Paul was such an angry man prior to his conversion.

One of the applications of this story is that we need never write someone off as being beyond the possibility of conversion. If God can convert this man, then he can convert anyone. He was the face of the church's enemy, and now everything has changed. Do you believe that God can convert anyone?

Illustration: About 12 years ago, we began giving a ride to school to a young man who was a classmate of our son, Matthew. He was very bright and gifted, but used those gifts in a cynical, negative way. He would sometimes come over to our house, and at times would attend youth group with Matthew. But his cynicism and negativity continued unabated, and he seemed to be at the top of the list of those least likely to come to faith in Christ. But he had an older brother who prayed for him, and some Christian friends in this church who continued to love him, befriend him and pray for him. He played trumpet, so Steve Whitner did his usual thing and recruited him to use that talent in the music ministry of this church and also reached out to him in spiritual ways outside of music. Then a couple of years after his high school graduation, God converted him. He came to this church until he moved out of town. Having spent a good bit of time with him both before and after his conversion, I can tell you that God has truly changed his life in significant ways since he came to faith in Jesus.

II. Saul's Conversion

While there are several features of this conversion that are not typical—the light, the voice from heaven, the blindness—there are other features of it that are typical. Let me mention just a few of them. First, this wasn't the sudden conversion it appears to be at first glance. We said last week that conversion to Christ takes time, and that when we probe a little with those who have come to Christ, we will find that God was at work in numerous ways for quite some time before their conversion. Is Saul an exception to this rule? What evidence is there that God was at work in his life prior to his Damascus road experience? In another account of Saul's conversion, Luke records Jesus as saying to Saul, **"It is hard for you to kick against the goads"** (Acts 26:14). The goads are the sharply-pointed sticks that animal handlers use to direct animals. God had been directing Saul, but he had been stubbornly resisting, kicking against God's prodding of him. Such kicking only served to increase Saul's pain. We don't know precisely what these goads were that God brought into Saul's life, but perhaps

they were the testimony of the many Christians Saul had persecuted. In any case, though, we see that God had been working in Saul's life prior to this conversion. C. S. Lewis, in referring to God's role in his own conversion, sees him as a relentless pursuer. My favorite image from Lewis in this is when he says that God is like a divine chess player who maneuvers us into the most disadvantageous position until in the end we are forced to concede a "checkmate."

A second way in which this conversion is typical of all Christian conversions is that it is so clearly accomplished by God's sovereign grace. Paul will say later about his conversion that **"the grace of our Lord overflowed for me"** (1 Tim. 1:14). Saul seemed the least likely of all people to come to faith in Christ. If someone had stopped him prior to his departure from Jerusalem for Damascus and said to him, "Saul, before you reach Damascus you will become a follower of the Jesus you are now so opposed to," he would probably have laughed at you. Yet that's exactly what happened, not because he was such a likely candidate who had been seeking God. He had been seeking as hard as he could the obliteration of this God named Jesus. But he is in fact converted.

The third way in which this conversion is typical is that it is focused on Jesus. Saul was converted when the resurrected and glorified Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. This was no vision or trance. The light Luke describes is the light surrounding the glorified Jesus, and the voice was Jesus' voice. He says, **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"** And then he says the same thing again after Saul asks who he is. **"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."** It must have been quite an eye-opener for Saul to hear that the God he thought he was defending by his zealous persecution of these Christians is actually the God he has been persecuting. He had thought Jesus was just some false prophet whose followers must be silenced at all costs. He sees now that Jesus is exactly who these Christians have been saying he is—God incarnate. It is tempting for us to base our conversion on some experience instead of on Christ. We even look to Saul's experience here and judge ours to be inferior by comparison, and therefore possibly not valid. We can even doubt our salvation because our experience is not what someone else's was. So the person whose coming to faith in Jesus is more gradual, with the result that this person can't remember the precise time of conversion, has doubts based on an experience. This person may even try to replicate some conversion experience so it will feel more valid. Saul's conversion ought to teach us to do just the opposite, because it was focused on Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit's work to turn our eyes from self to Jesus. It is Satan's greatest desire to get us to look at ourselves and our experiences, instead of at Jesus. I like the way Charles Spurgeon speaks of this.

[Satan] insinuates, "Your sins are too great for pardon; you have no faith; you do not repent enough; you will never be able to continue to the end; you do not have the joy of His children; you have such a wavering hold on Jesus." All these are thoughts about self, and we will never find comfort or assurance by looking within. But the Holy Spirit turns our eyes entirely away from self: He tells us that we are nothing, but that Christ is everything. Remember, therefore, it is not *your hold* on Christ that

saves you—it is Christ; it is not *your joy* in Christ that saves you—it is Christ; it is not even faith in Christ, although that is the instrument—it is Christ's blood and merits. Therefore, do not look so much to your hand with which you are grasping Christ as to Christ (*Morning and Evening*, June 28).

III. Saul's Post-Conversion Life

There are several results of Saul's conversion, one of which is a changed relationship with the church. Instead of arresting them in hopes of a conviction and execution, he now wants to join them in fellowship and the worship of Jesus. This is always one of the results of true conversion. But there was a problem in this area that is not hard to understand. Twice, Luke reports that when Saul wanted to join the church, the church was skeptical. Ananias was the first one to experience this. Told by God to go and bring healing to Saul's blind eyes, he questions the Lord's command. But he does go, in obedience to God, and Saul's sight is restored. The same thing happens again when he goes to Jerusalem and wants to join the church there. Even though it has been three years since he left Jerusalem to journey to Damascus, the Christians there still remember his persecution against the church. No doubt, they wonder if Saul's desire to become a part of the fellowship is some undercover plan to kill more of them. But Barnabas steps up in this case and defends Saul, with the result that he is welcomed in the church.

Here's an important application for us to learn in this. God calls us to welcome into our midst even those we may judge to be the least likely to come to him. Perhaps God has done a great work or is in the process of doing one, and our welcome of them may make the difference. We thank God for Ananias and Barnabas. If it weren't for the two of them, it may be that the church would have been deprived of its greatest missionary ever.

CONCLUSION:

Back in the early 70's, a young teenage girl moved to Charlotte, North Carolina from just outside Pittsburgh. Though no one else in her family was attending church, she began doing so when someone invited her to attend their youth group. She was not the ideal youth group member. She flirted with the boys and couldn't seem to keep her mouth shut when she was supposed to. Some of the parents of the youth group members wouldn't let their teenagers sit with her in church, because she was a bad influence on them. One family, though, welcomed her fully and often gave her rides to youth group events. Several years later, this teenager was converted to Christ as a college student. After another few years, Wendy Strassner met Brad Allison and became his wife. There are many Wendy Strassners in our midst. We pray that God will help us to welcome them and that we would pray for their conversions.