

You Can't Fight It, Paul

From the series: Christian Faith: Interpretations of Experience

Text: Acts 9:4; Acts 26:14, 19

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Spring Lake, Michigan
Eastertide, April 26, 1998

Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Christian faith is one of the great world religions, flowing out of the faith tradition of Israel and developing from the event of Jesus Christ, as Israel's faith tradition, following the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 77 CE, developed along the lines of Rabbinic Judaism. Out of the First Century, then, two religious traditions developed, both rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, or, as the church has traditionally referred to them, the Old Testament.

Religions are rooted in a foundational experience of a person or a people in which some profound insight overwhelms the subjects of the experience, creating a whole new perspective on the nature of things: on God, on the meaning of being human, on the purpose of life. One is transformed and one's life is reorganized around that life-changing experience. We can speak of a paradigm shift - some insight, some discovery throws everything up in the air and a whole new configuration of reality emerges.

This happens in the natural sciences; it happens in religious understanding. Perhaps it is most accurate to speak of a *foundational experience that effects a radical perceptual shift*.

This happens all the time to all of us in all sorts of human understanding in the spectrum of human knowledge. Some years ago there was a film with a title something like, "You Are What You Were When." The powerful impacting events that we experience during adolescence will shape us for a lifetime. Only a significant emotional experience later can alter our perception of reality and our instinctive responses to life.

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 - the experience of the great wars of this century, the Holocaust.

On an individual scale, this happens to us all - experience and the emotional response to concrete experiences form our perception of reality. On the larger canvas of the human story, we see the same thing - A foundational experience finds expression in a story using images, symbol, metaphor; the story eventually

is probed for its meaning and that meaning is given conceptual expression. We have an intellectual systematic account of reality on the basis of the foundational experience.

Moses leads a slave band out of Egypt to freedom - the Exodus becomes the foundational event of Israel.

The Jewish teacher and prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, is crucified by Imperial Rome and his followers despair because they had hoped through him God would bring to consummation God's reign and then one day, preparing to take up again the fishing trade in Galilee, Peter experiences Jesus as a living presence and he is transformed by that experience, declaring, "The Lord is risen."

If such an experience had been limited to the immediate followers of Jesus, all Jewish, all hoping for God's final visitation to God's people Israel, there would perhaps have been an ongoing Jesus Jewish movement - as there was for a century or two, but there would probably not have emerged what we know as the Christian church. To understand that phenomenon into which we have entered, we must move to Paul, or as he is named in his first appearances in Acts, Saul.

Now we are dealing not with a Galilean peasant nor with a disciple of Jesus, but with a well educated, well traveled member of the strictest of the Jewish groupings, the Pharisees - the group who was serious in its observance of Jewish religious practices, strictly following the prescriptions of Torah.

Furthermore, we are dealing not with a Pharisee who was open to Jesus as was, for example, Gamaliel or Nicodemus. Rather, we are dealing with one who is in the employ of the High Priestly establishment, committed to the stamping out of the movement that gathered around Jesus, the movement called People of the Way.

The story of Paul's revelatory experience is familiar enough. We read Luke's account in Acts 19. Luke sees this experience as so critical to the development of the Christian religion that he repeats the story twice more, in chapter 22 of Acts and chapter 26.

We in the Christian church speak without thinking of the conversion of Saul or Paul. But this was not a conversion from one God to another or even from one religion to another. Paul was born a Jew and died a Jew and never claimed to be anything else and consistently declared the God of Israel to be God alone, Creator of all and ultimate Goal of all. Paul was not a convert to a new religion; rather, he experienced a radical perceptual shift -

Jesus was indeed God's anointed one whose death on the cross was the means by which God effected reconciliation with humankind. Further, God had raised Jesus from the dead and destined Paul to declare this reality of reconciliation to the Gentiles, the nations beyond the bounds of Israel.

I cannot here recount the whole story of Paul's missionary journeys, the tension created with the Jewish Jesus Movement led by Peter and James, the brother of Jesus at Jerusalem, and the compromise they reached. I want, rather, to focus on the interpretive shift that Paul effected on the basis of his experience of being encountered by the Risen Lord.

Paul had a vision, a revelation, an unveiling. It was a transformation experience that resulted in new insight and a radical perceptual shift - out of it came the Christian movement, the Christian church and the Christian tradition.

The shift from the performance principle - righteousness through obedience to the Law or Torah, observance as a way of life - to the reality of grace: present existence as a new creation marked by confidence that God has given us our life as sheer gift to be lived in freedom with joy and peace in loving community. One enters the reality of the people of God by faith - confidence that this is so. This was a new conception of the nature of religion - response of gratitude for the gift of life. Thus, religious observance is because of, not in order to....

A second insight: God has elected not only Israel and not Israel as a biological, historical people, but also in Christ, the Gentiles, the nations. This was a radical departure from the traditional conception of Israel as God's elect.

But, so far, we might agree that all of this is interesting and does explain the eventual break between Judaism and the Christian church. But, is the radical perceptual shift effected in and through Paul the last word?

E. A. Sanders raises the question, what if Paul had lived beyond the first generation of the Jesus movement, or, what if he could have seen out 2000 years that his apocalyptic scheme of the near end of the age would not happen? We know what he thought in his own context: the only way to be saved was through faith in Jesus Christ for both Jew and Gentile.

But, what if he saw from our historical perspective, the Christian tradition, the continuing Jewish tradition and a world of other faiths - would he still claim salvation through Jesus Christ alone? Sanders says he personally would vote against such a claim in any ecclesiastical assembly today and he suspects so would Paul.

Paul, in Romans, near the end of his career wrestled with the native convictions he held - that God had chosen Israel and would be faithful to that election of grace; yet, in his revelation Paul sees access to God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the one largely rejected by the "Elect People," Paul's brothers and sisters. There was conflict in Paul, tension. He struggled with this problem in Romans 9-11, concluding that somehow the Gentiles would be included by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and, mysteriously, Israel too would be included. Israel's large-scale rejection of Paul's Gospel distressed him; yet he could not simply write them off.

I am finally encouraged by the confusion of the great Apostle. I like a questioning Paul. It gives me courage. Paul entered into a present experience of God's grace giving him freedom, joy, peace and love. That was his great discovery and he witnessed to it with passion. In regard to God's timetable in history, he was wrong. The present age did not come to an end. The Messiah, the Risen Lord, did not return in clouds of glory. So, obviously, there were chapters yet to be written about which the Apostle had no clue. Nor do we.

But, the present possibility of resurrection life, life as sheer gift to be received with gratitude and lived with wonder - about that the Apostle was quite right - it is the continuing present possibility for all who have eyes to see it and mind and hearts open to it.

And, is that not enough - life as gift, sheer gift, the gift of God Whose intention was revealed in the face of the Crucified, who lives, who is present with us in the ongoing journey of faith in the adventure of life?