

Not Converted – Just Amazed by Grace

Text: Acts 9:5; Philippians 3:10

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

“Tell me, Lord, he said, who you are... I am Jesus...” Acts 9:5

*“...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”
Philippians 3:10*

Conversion is a term that is used frequently in Christian language and Christian thinking. It is an integral part of our whole understanding of how one turns in faith to God. The word itself means to turn around, to turn from something. The dictionary definition is to turn from one doctrine or opinion or from one religion to another. So we speak of people being “converted.” In the Christian Gospel we call people to conversion, to repentance and faith.

We have noted in this post-Pentecost series that there are those stories Luke recounts to show how the telling of the story of Jesus in the wake of crucifixion and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit was effected in that early community. There was a movement—there was a Jesus Movement. They were called the Followers of The Way. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached and thousands believed that this Jesus was indeed God’s anointed one. Then we have the story of Peter who had a vision. He went to a Roman centurion, to his house. There he told the story of Jesus, and the Spirit of God fell, and the Gentiles in that house believed that Jesus indeed was God’s special emissary, God’s anointed one. Then there was Philip who went to Samaria with great response to the story of Jesus, until the Spirit whisked him away to the road to Gaza where he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch, who also heard the story of Jesus and wanted to be included and was baptized.

And then there was Stephen, who had understood maybe more clearly than any of them the breaking forth of the Spirit—of the Spirit of God beyond those narrow constrictive bounds of national and ethnic identity. And he paid for it with his life. The account of his martyr’s death speaks of one who was standing there witnessing that, assenting to his death. That one was a Jew named Saul. Luke

goes on to tell us in the 3rd verse of the 8th chapter of the book of Acts that Saul was ravishing the Christian movement, the church. Then he drops Saul for a while to tell us about Philip. But now in the 9th chapter he comes back to this individual and we find that Saul is still breathing out threatenings and murder to the church. He even gets authority to move out of Jerusalem to go to Damascus to imprison and persecute Followers of The Way. But he is stopped dead in his tracks. Flannery O'Connor says, "The Lord must have reckoned in order to make a Christian out of that one, He'd have to knock him off his horse!" Well, we don't know if Paul was afoot or on horseback, but when it happened to him, he didn't know either. It was one of those sudden, dramatic, traumatic experiences, cataclysmic in its effect. Paul was conquered, and surrendered. The voice said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Why?" I wonder if that was the question that was the catalyst of the surrender? Luke doesn't give us a lot of psychologizing about the interior life of Saul and the things that had been going on in him, but that little question "Why? Why Saul? Why are you doing this?" It's a good question. Saul surrenders. He rises blind and helpless and is led into the city of his destination, but now in a totally different state. After three days a Christian disciple whom he had come to arrest comes to him and says, "Brother Saul." That is the story of Saul's conversion, his turning around.

It doesn't always happen so dramatically. Luke gives us a number of stories so that we can see that there's not one stereotypical manner in which this has to happen, but this turning in the case of Saul was so dramatic. It lifts up some elements that are really a part of the conversion process through which we all go in a number of areas in our life, a number of times. Someone has said that the first thing that's true of a genuine conversion is that one is detached from familiar patterns of identity. Detachment is a painful process. We don't like to be detached. We all want a sense of identity, a kind of comfort zone, knowing who we are, where we are, what we are about, what the meaning and purpose of it all is.

Then something happens and we are suddenly wrenched loose from that. We are detached from that. And, that's very threatening. Often times – and now I am psychologizing for Paul a little bit, but I don't think apart from the stuff that Luke gives us – often time it happens that when one senses that one is about to be ripped loose, wrenched out of something familiar and comfortable, one grows very angry. I don't think it was by chance that Luke gave us that little snapshot of Paul standing there while they were stoning Stephen. He didn't pick up a stone, but he held their garments, and was assenting to what was happening. He saw Stephen pray, "Oh God, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." It must have impacted him. In order to suppress that, to repress that, to keep that down, those doubts that must have been rising within him, Luke tells us that he increased his hostile violence against the Followers of The Way. We don't want to be detached from our familiar patterns of identity.

I have made no secret of the fact that I think that the Reformed Church in America ought to die—and the Christian Reformed Church, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church. I think those denominations ought to die. Once they arose very naturally, to be explained geographically, ethnically. And they have been the agents of the grace of God and the sharing of the Gospel, but they are not so any more. They are now barriers. They are anachronistic structures that suck up energy and time and resources. Where once they were the instruments of the Spirit, they have become barriers to the Spirit. That's what I think. This crotchety, parochial, dull-witted, stubborn, obstinate, old Dutch Reformed Church is my family. I don't want to be without a family! I imbibed that culture with my mother's milk! Who am I then? Where will I go? Detachment - detachment is painful; it's wrenching.

We don't do that easily because what we anticipate is the second step in a conversion process. That is a period of rootlessness, disorientation. Everything is changed. We don't have any place to plant our feet. We don't know who we are or where we are going, what the purpose of it all is. It is a very uncomfortable period of time. And we resist that, but when we don't have any options left and we are pushed into it, eventually the ground begins to solidify again and we find a new configuration. We suddenly see things in a whole new design, and actually it can be characterized as a bright light. It comes together again. Then, finally, because this doesn't happen in splendid isolation as though we are all individuals off on our own, finally once again we are ushered into a new community. Invited to a new table. We experience table fellowship. Everything is changed. Everything is new. Once again we can breathe with some ease and some comfort. That was the experience of Paul. And that, I think, to a greater or lesser degree is the kind of experience we all go through in a conversion process.

Now I think we have been sold a bad bill of goods by much of the evangelical movement of the last century or two, which makes conversion a kind of once-for-all momentary experience of transformation from darkness to light, from error to truth, from reprobation to salvation. That rather modern understanding of conversion has seeped into our conservative evangelical churches as well. But I don't think it was true to the story of Paul, because Paul didn't move from darkness to light. Paul didn't move from godlessness to God. Paul didn't move from reckless unrighteousness to righteousness. Because if we read his own statement in the 3rd chapter of Philippians he tells about his Jewish heritage. If we read that as a denigration of that heritage, we misread it. There is not a word of denigration about Paul's Jewish experience. Paul says, quite the contrary, that all of that was gain. He says, "You want to talk about credentials, let me tell you about myself: circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew, born of Hebrew parents, from the Tribe of Benjamin. In terms of my own particular religious conviction, a Pharisee, a follower of the strictest sect. In terms of my status: top of the line. And if you want to talk about accomplishment: I was zealous. I persecuted the Church. As to the law: I was blameless." Paul is not saying that that was something apart from his experience as a Child of God. Paul was not brought into

the covenant of grace. Paul stood *in the middle* of the covenant of grace. Paul was a recipient of that gracious election of God who chose that people to be God's special instrument.

Paul did not move from godlessness to God. Paul moved from God to God, from Light to Greater Light. Suddenly. This is why I call it *Not Converted - simply Amazed by Grace*, to point out that Paul didn't suddenly come to know the true God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the God of Israel. That God Paul knew. That God Paul served. That God Paul loved. But all of that which was gain for him suddenly paled in the light of this new understanding of God in the face of Jesus, the Jew. So he says, "For the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord...I've lost everything and I count it as nothing." But that is not a statement about the value of his tradition. It is a statement about the surpassing worth of that new understanding that he had of the same God that he'd always known. That's what conversion is.

We've been sold a bad bill of goods to think about conversion as bringing people from outside in. I think sometimes what we are really doing in our evangelism is to bring people in to make them like us, to confirm our own convictions and to shore up our own faith. Conversion is for the Church. That was the Reformation insight. In the Heidelberg Catechism the definition of conversion is not once-for-all being born again and sailing on from there. In the Heidelberg Catechism conversion is the daily dying of the old person and the daily rising of the new. It is a daily reorientation because we are a pilgrim people. We are on pilgrimage passing through ever-new landscapes. And with every turn of the corner there is potentially some surprise of grace. The Christian life is a life of growing in understanding and insight. Sometimes there are those crises periods and it is dramatic. More often it is a quiet, "Oh, I see."

The Reformation heritage that is ours understood it perfectly in its inception, because what happened in the sixteenth century was not the Reformed Church. It was the Church of God Re-formed according to the Word of God. If I could give you the Latin phrase, the Latin would be translated this way: A church re-formed according to the Word of God and always being re-formed. And the moment the church became The Reformed Church it became a blot to the Spirit of God. What we want to do in our humanness is to nail it down. To make it simple. To make it clear. To be able to get a handle on it. To have it as comfortable as an old pair of slippers. So we can't live very long, we can't live beyond the first generation of those that were able to live with the Church re-forming according to the Word of God and always being re-formed. We want The Reformed Church! And we become an ideology. We become a cult, we become sect, and we deny the Spirit of God whose freedom must continue to break down all those forms and structures that would imprison us. Ah, it would make us feel secure, but they bind our soul and deny the liberty of the children of God.

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is,” Paul said, “there is liberty.” The Christian experience is one of ongoing, continual conversion. Ongoing. Turning. Twisting. To gain new insight into the greatness and wonder of the God of all grace. That is the exciting adventure—the pilgrimage to which we are called, to which we are invited.

I would ask you: Have you been converted? When is the last time you were converted? When is the last time that something that seemed so clear and simple suddenly slipped through your fingers and you felt yourself spinning, twisting in the wind until finally your feet came to stand in another place and you said, “Wow!” J.B. Phillips wrote long ago *Your God is Too Small*. Has your God grown lately? Have you been alive and excited with the marvel of the wonder of the grace of God that would continue to beckon us into ever-wider vistas and ever-richer experience?

We as a community have celebrated with gratitude the retirement of John Gregory Bryson from his teaching in the public schools. We know him for his music, but generations of students know him for his geography. If you think he’s a taskmaster in front of the choir, you should have had him for geography. You see, I had a couple of boys that went through that process. He was unrelenting in his demands, and Greg made students color within the lines. (Laughter) John is neat as a pin — takes after his mother— “a place for everything, everything in its place.” That’s the regime I live under. (Laughter) I am able to sustain that because that’s the way I was raised too, but my genes are different. So if you’ve got a teacher that gives you a set of colored pencils and a blank white map with all the lines and you have to get it all right, that can be persecution. Now Greg has retired. Generations of students have gone through, probably still scarred in their psyche (Laughter), but with Greg’s retirement the whole world changes. The map doesn’t work. It’s obsolete. All the lines have to be withdrawn. But the world’s still here. The world is still here.

So, let yourself go. Breathe deeply. Trust the Spirit of God who takes it all away and gives it back better than you ever dreamed of. If you want a place still to nail it down, then take the bread, take the cup, remember and be full of hope. For Jesus said, “Do this...‘til I come.”