

It's So Simple, Once You See It

Ephesians 3; Matthew 2

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Spring Lake, Michigan
Season of Epiphany, January 11, 1998

*Transcription of the spoken sermon, published in a collection of sermons,
Re-Imagining The Faith by Richard A. Rhem (2004)*

The season is Epiphany, the season of manifestation, Jesus manifest to the nations. The symbol is the star which led the *Magi* to the Christ child, where they worshiped and offered gifts. The heart of the season's truth is that the God of Israel is God alone, Creator of the cosmos whose embrace is as wide as the whole world; that what was embodied in Jesus, and came to expression in his life, was the moment when the particular revelation of God to Israel broke out to enlighten all humankind.

That such should occur was clearly a theme in Israel's prophetic tradition. Indeed, the calling of Abraham and Sarah was a particular call with a universal purpose—that all nations would be blessed within the Covenant of Grace intended for all peoples. The movement to the universal that occurred in Jesus was Paul's great insight—given to him, he claimed, by revelation from the resurrected Christ. I cannot take you to the story of his “conversion” as he tells it in the first chapter of Galatians or as Luke records it three times in the Book of Acts, but clearly the consequences of his heavenly vision were his tireless efforts to bring the good news that happened in Jesus to the ancient world.

Let me explain here that the reason the word conversion is in quotation marks is to indicate that the popular view and easy assumption that Paul “converted” from Judaism to Christianity is unfounded. Like Jesus, Paul was born a Jew and died a Jew. The God of Israel is the only God Paul ever knew or worshiped. What happened to Paul was not conversion from one world religion to another. Actually, Christianity as we know it did not exist in Paul's time, although a strong case can be made for the claim that Paul was the founder of Christianity. But, out of his profound encounter with the risen Christ in the vision on the Damascus road, Paul was unintentionally drawing out the implications of Israel's faith.

Paul's moment of revelation was not a rejection of Judaism. Rather, he was coming to terms with its most far-reaching implications: Yahweh was not a tribal deity. Yahweh was God alone, Creator of the Cosmos, the One who enlivened all things living. Out of his revelatory experience, Paul—without consulting the

disciples in Jerusalem—went alone to Arabia for three years, trying to make sense of his faith tradition and his encounter with the Risen One.

In a fascinating study, the English writer A. N. Wilson sets the context for Paul's visionary experience. Wilson says that Paul was part of the Temple police on his way to Damascus to arrest the followers of Jesus. Was Paul already part of the Temple police when Jesus was arrested? Was he even involved?

Certainly Paul knew the horror of crucifixion, and certainly he was party to the violence of religious persecution. And, while on another mission of such violence, he sees a light—a blinding light. He hears a voice which raises the haunting question, “Why are you persecuting me?”

Wilson paints a picture of the world of Judaism in Paul's day, telling us that the Temple was magnificent, one of Herod's great building projects. People from the ancient world came to view its splendor. Yet, Herod was an Arab, purportedly a convert to Judaism, but not a native Israelite, and the financing came from Roman imperial funds. Wilson writes:

There it was—a splendid Temple set on the Holy Mountain with spacious courts and colonnaded areas. Yet, the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, could not be entered by any non-Jew.

Here was the conflict, the contradiction: Israel was to be a beacon, a light to the nations, yet marked off its inner sanctuary as exclusive territory.

And the followers of the Way were, like Paul, Jews. Now the conflict was not only between the insider Jew and the outsider Gentile, but within the Jewish community itself—exclusion, persecution, violence. And he, Saul, is a part of it, on his way to perpetrate more violence when he sees a blinding light and hears a voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

Wilson uses creative imagination in setting the context for Paul's vision, but not without good biblical data.

The consequence of that encounter was not that Paul became a Christian. It was, however, a transforming moment when he became convinced that Jesus was the Christ—that is, the Messiah—and that, in Jesus, God was making evident what was always true: that God embraced Jew and Gentile and the purpose of God's revelation to the Jews was to bring the light of God's love and grace to all.

That was Paul's realization consequent upon the revelation. That is expressed nowhere so succinctly as in the Letter to the Ephesians. What does Paul understand his mission to be? “To make everyone see what is the plan of the secret hidden for ages in God who created all things.”

To make everyone see. The word in the Greek is *photizo*. From it comes our word *photo*; a photo is the exposure of a film to light. Paul's mission is to proclaim "the light—becoming of the secret."

And the secret? Verse 6: "that is, the Gentiles (the nations, in Greek the *ethnai*, from which we get *ethnic*) have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

The word *mysterion* can be translated as mystery or secret. Paul says it was a secret hidden in God throughout the ages, but now made manifest. Now, Paul claims, the secret is out.

The secret revealed is that the outsider has been included together with the insider in God's love and Messiah's realm. For Paul, this was not simply a piece of intellectual information, it was a life-transforming truth and a transforming religious insight.

Now Paul sees something bigger than peace among rival Jewish factors. Suddenly, or gradually perhaps, the lights come on for Paul. Not only is the intramural conflict within Judaism wrong, so is the Jewish exclusion of the Gentile wrong, at least now that light has dawned in Jesus. Now God has revealed in Jesus what was always in God's heart - love for all humankind.

Jesus brought peace. Jesus broke down the wall that separates. Jesus did away with the hostility. Now Jew and Gentile were made one new humanity. Now the community of Jew and Gentile would result in worship offered to God by Jew and Gentile alike, bringing peace to the world.

Understand: here Paul moves out alone. Now he does battle on two fronts. Against him is the Jewish establishment, which had employed him, and the Jewish followers of Jesus who were not at all ready to open the doors to the Gentiles.

Paul's revelation made him a visionary. There was no rejection of Judaism. Paul remained a Jew, but was rejected by his native faith. And he was contradicted even by those who before him believed Jesus was the Messiah, for he saw something more radical in Jesus than did James or Peter. Paul saw in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ a Divine grace that embraced the whole human family.

Following the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E., only Rabbinic Judaism, the Pharisaic Party, survived and formed the basis for ongoing Jewish faith and life. Gradually the parochial Jewish Jesus movement died out. Because Paul had brought the good news of the God of Israel revealed in Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, there emerged the Christian Church through which we are included.

Paul's mission, he writes, was to make everyone see the "light- becoming" of the secret that there is one God and one human family loved by God and thus, one family called to peace, to community. He was consumed by the passion of his insight. Listen to his prayer:

I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ... That you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ... That you may comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

And Paul is not through; such ecstasy of imagination brings him to doxology:

...to the praise of the God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine—to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus.

One cannot read those words, I think, without being caught up in the surprising wonder of the vision that animated the apostle. He has no words sufficient to articulate the fiery passion that would burst his mind and heart.

Remember who he is: a Temple policeman, committed to violence in the name of the religious institution, who in a moment of blinding insight and years of subsequent reflection sees the big picture. Paul sees the absurdity of claiming the God of Israel to be God alone, Creator of cosmos, and then acting as though that God was a tribal deity, mean-spirited, petty and narrowly limited in the offer of love and grace. Suddenly for Paul, the light goes on, the truth dawns in him; he sees! And his life from that realization was passionately poured out in the proclaiming of God's grace in Jesus Christ for the whole human family.

On the threshold of the Third Millennium, look at our world: still marked by exclusionary claims of competing religions and religious institutions; still bathed in violence fueled by religion; still crippled by divisions kept alive by petty meanness and narrowness.

Look at the church in general, to say nothing of the perilous situation of competing religions. The church is divided and threatened, marked more by insecurity and threat than by confident joy; by shutting out rather than drawing in; by creating fear rather than giving confidence; by judgment rather than grace; by shrill claims rather than calming assurance.

Thank God we've discovered something together here. We do not have easy answers, but we are discovering the real questions. We have not arrived, but we are a people on the way. We are not morally beyond reproach, but we know the

grace of forgiveness. We do not love fully or perfectly, but we have tasted the humanizing quality of loving the other. We have not the full spectrum of the human family represented here, but we are learning the enrichment of embracing the stranger.

We have been marked for a quarter century by a theology of grace that is expressive of God's love in action, inviting, embracing, healing. We have been open to all and have excluded none that sought community here. That theology of grace has worked on us, changing us, making us sensitive to a growing number of those traditionally outside our community.

Jewish-Christian dialogue has opened us to the enrichment and beauty of the Jewish community. Sensitivity to the claims of women has opened us to an awareness of how injustice has marked us in the matter of gender. Breakthroughs in the understanding of sexual orientation have enabled us to stand against the exclusion and condemnation of persons of homosexual orientation. And we have only just begun. But begun we have, by God's grace.

Paul's whole being throbbed with passion that could hardly find expression once he saw it. "The secret is out," he said. No more are there outsiders and insiders; the whole human family takes its name from the one God who loves all and excludes none.

And I pray you will begin to comprehend, to be strengthened in your inner being, rooted and grounded in love.

"My whole life," writes the apostle, "is a mission to make everyone see, to bring to light the secret now made manifest."

Ah, dear people, don't you see it? God give us Epiphany eyes to see, to see! It's so simple, once you see it!

Reference:

A. N. Wilson. *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*. W. W. Norton & Co., 1998.