

Can Good People Be Converted?

Acts 9:1-6

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Everybody knows that bad people can be converted. The world is full of such stories. John Newton, the “wretch” who wrote “Amazing Grace” was a slave-trader who repented of his sin. “I was blind,” he said, “but now I see.” We’ve all heard testimonies of lives turned around by Jesus; I myself have introduced alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes, and former prisoners. I think to myself, “Now*that’s* a testimony! I wish I’d been *worse* before I became a Christian—at age seven. Thank God I at least got kicked out of high school.”

So this is my tentative conclusion from a lifetime of Baptist testimonies: *bad* people can change. If your life is really bad, so that you get completely disgusted with yourself and you hit rock bottom, real change is possible. If you find yourself in the mud with the pigs like the prodigal son—if you’ve got nowhere to go but up—you’ll think about going home and be converted. Some of the witnessing techniques I learned started by showing people how bad they really are.

When we come to the story of Paul on the road to Damascus, we are tempted to hear it as another of those testimonies of a really bad person turning to Jesus. After all, in 1 Timothy Paul calls himself “the chief of sinners.” The Damascus road experience is held up as the paradigm for Christian conversion.

The problem with that reading is that Paul is only the chief of sinners in his own mind as he thinks of himself in relation to God. If you look at Paul objectively, he was a good and religious person. He says in the letter to the Galatians, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors” (1:15). He says in the letter to the Philippians that he was “a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee of the Pharisees; as far as zeal went, he was so zealous that he persecuted the church; as far as righteousness under the law went, he was blameless” (3:5-6). Some have portrayed Paul as a man wracked with a guilt problem like Luther or Augustine, who finally found grace and peace on the road to Damascus. But there is nothing in the Bible to lead us to think that.

On the contrary, here is the story we get. Although born a Roman citizen in Tarsus (in modern Turkey), Paul was educated in Jerusalem under the rabbi Gamaliel. He was most likely present when the unpleasantness caused by the pretender Jesus of Nazareth disturbed the city. We know that Paul stood by approving as the Christian preacher Stephen was stoned as a heretic. The next thing we hear is that Paul is so upset by this cult group called “The Way” that he is threatening them and talking homicide. He is not just following the crowd on this issue; he is leading the way. Paul goes to the high priest and gets something like a religious warrant to take to the synagogue in Damascus, which says that if he finds any of those Jews who are followers of Jesus hiding out in Damascus he is authorized to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem to face trial. Paul himself says in a letter, “I was violently persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13).

Does this make Paul an evil person? No, it makes him a passionately religious one. He sees the Jesus cult as a real threat to Judaism, and he has the same kind of anger about blasphemy that we see often among Muslims today, but only rarely among Christians. He is desperately trying to do the right thing when he sees God’s kingdom under attack by a fake Messiah. I take Paul’s word for it that he followed the Jewish law perfectly. He never violated the commandments—like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. His conscience was clear.

At this point it seems to me that the Damascus road story is not about the conversion of a bad man. It’s about how a *good* man got converted. Saul did not bottom out or even glimpse the meanness in his own heart. He met the risen Jesus Christ. That’s why this story is in the lectionary for the Easter season: this is yet another appearance by Jesus, another of those times when he “showed himself” to select people. Paul makes it clear in his letters that he considers Jesus’ appearance to him every bit as real as Jesus’ appearance to Peter, John, Thomas and the rest. However physical or spiritual the Easter Jesus was, he was just the same on the road to Damascus.

So this is a story of a perfectly religious person on a trip to do his religious duty to arrest false teachers when something utterly unexpected happens. “Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.” This idea of God in lightning or a bright fire is a common way of thinking of the divine presence. So Paul is having some kind of encounter with the holy. But then a voice speaks to Paul. He must have guessed it was God’s voice. The voice calls him by name, his Jewish name, “Saul, Saul”—saying it twice like “Abraham, Abraham” or “Moses, Moses.” “Why are you persecuting me?”

Huh? I’m confused. I’m on your side, God. I’m persecuting the bad guys. Why would you say I am persecuting you?” In his confusion Paul asks, “Who are you, Lord?”—although the same words could mean “Who are you, sir?” But the reply comes: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

In that moment Paul knew that he had been wrong about everything. The lie that he was out to expose was actually the truth. The people that he wanted to see dead were actually followers of the Messiah. And in hurting them he had been hurting the Messiah. Saul had based his life and his career on the assumption that Jesus could not possibly be alive. He knew that Jesus had been put to death as one more false teacher pretending to be the Messiah, and that if he had been the Messiah God would not have allowed him to be killed. Saul was absolutely certain of that. But now the Crucified One appeared before him surrounded by the glory of God. The risen Jesus spoke to him by name, and Paul spent the rest of his life proclaiming the very truth he had tried to extinguish: that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, that he is in fact risen from the dead, and that it is by uniting ourselves with Jesus that we are restored to fellowship with God forever.

If Paul had a besetting sin, it must have been certainty. It is a form of pride, to believe that you are right about everything important—and you see that tone become a problem in some of Paul’s letters. The thing is, most of us *crave* certainty. We think faith and certainty are the same thing. That’s one reason some people commit themselves to a faith group: they want to settle on one particular answer to life’s questions and move on. Paul believed the scriptures without reservation. He thought at the time that his scheme of interpreting them was the correct one. He had been to the best schools.

But that sense of certainty about religion was what led Paul to dismiss as ridiculous and dangerous the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, or that God would have let the Messiah be executed by the Romans. He was sure that that was impossible. Until he met Jesus. The account doesn’t say that Paul saw anything. He heard a voice and it was Jesus. The reality he experienced—that Jesus was actually alive, and that Paul was on the wrong side *against* the Messiah—changed everything.

We can think of times our religion has been on the wrong side and against Jesus: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the persecution of Jews. And in this country, Baptists were often on the side of slavery and segregation, restricting the role of women, and persecuting gays. They were good religious people who did those things. They were trying to do the right thing. But they were, like Paul, zealous for their traditions rather than listening to the voice of the living Jesus Christ.

I think that in Protestant churches there are many good people doing what they believe is right—some zealous, some not. Often they are following the traditions they have inherited. They believe in God and can affirm the creeds in a general way. As far as they know, they are blameless under the law; they very rarely do things they know are wrong at the time. Like Paul, they believe in the institution and are willing to defend it from harm.

But the question that Paul’s story raises is: Can these good people be converted? Is it possible for them to be knocked off their high horses, or knocked off the straight and narrow, by the voice of Jesus? Is it possible that there is something more than doing the right thing and giving your fair share? Is it possible that Jesus is alive, and can speak to you, and that he has a mission for you? In Paul’s case, that mission was something unthinkable: offering salvation through the Jewish Messiah to the Gentiles.

One of the core ideas of the Baptist churches from the beginning was that every person has to make an individual response to Christ, a free response. The church is a gathered body made up of people who have encountered Jesus and chosen to follow him. The way they talked about this was to say they believed in “a regenerate church membership.” Every person in the church had been re-generated, born again, converted. There

were to be no members who simply grew up in the faith but had not personally encountered the divine and changed their minds.

It is not the case that Paul's dramatic conversion is intended to be a model. His experience is unique. Jesus is going to encounter every person in a different way. For most of us there won't be a flash of light. We may come to know him gradually as in a sunrise.

But I do think that Jesus wants to disturb every one of us with the thought that what we are doing in the name of religion may be hurting Jesus himself. That was his message not only to Paul but earlier to the Pharisees. In our zeal to stand up for the right and to enforce it we may be working at cross purposes with the Messiah and his kingdom. And whenever we fight to maintain the status quo, whenever we assume that the kingdom is in the past rather than in the future, we are fighting Jesus. "Why are you persecuting me?"

Many of us are, after years in church, full of certainty about how things are. We are pretty much capable of carrying on church work without Jesus. We don't expect much from God, and we don't think God expects more than is reasonable from us. It is very hard for us to entertain the thought that like Paul we might have become *disoriented* to God. We might be upside down to what God is trying to do. The first step toward righting ourselves and hearing the voice of Jesus is to allow ourselves to doubt our view of reality. I'm not a great fan of Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan revolutionary, but I often think of the letter he wrote in frustration to the general assembly of the Church of Scotland, which said, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken."

Of course it is possible that I am mistaken. In fact, that may be the one thing I am absolutely certain of. But I am as certain as I can be about anything outside my control that there is a Jesus who died for us and rose again. The evidence I have from the Bible and history and experience is that the risen Jesus is wild, coming and going as he wills, and that he is generally disruptive to our plans. Jesus is always calling us to focus on things beyond our present priorities. He calls us to focus on people who are not even in our field of vision at this point. And while his voice messes up our plans, his voice always tells us "You are forgiven. You are loved. You are accepted. And you are called." No matter how good you are in your own estimation, you are forgiven. No matter how together or proper your life is, you are called to something more.