

April 10, 2016

Conversion Is Not a Contest

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Acts 9:1-20

[The Conversion of Saul]

9 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

[Saul Preaches in Damascus]

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Referencing Jacob and Moses respectively, Will Willimon wrote that Paul was hardly the first reprobate or murderer chosen by God for an important job.^[1] With all due respect to the Reverend Dr. Willimon, I beg to differ. Both Jacob and Moses did evil, knowing good and well they were doing so, knowing that they acted in self-interest, for

personal gain. Saul, which was his name before he was Paul, believed with all his heart that what his religion and his country needed was for the Christ-followers to be put down one way or another, once and for all. And unlike the official Jewish big-wigs in Jerusalem, who had neither the heart nor the stomach for it, Saul's faith had both the heart and the stomach to do the dirty work of putting them down.

As it turned out, Saul was wrong on one point – a really important point as it turned out.

But he wasn't wrong about everything, most especially about the nature of faith. Acts 9 is the second most important story in the New Testament after the resurrection of Christ – the nativity of the church in the world, if you will.

Jewish leadership in Jerusalem had successfully scattered the church centralized there by stoning one believer to death: that gentle boy named Stephen. The apostles – Peter, John, and the others – sent the rest of the believers out of the city, into the territories and over the borders. Saul approved of the killing, Luke says, but wanted more. While Jerusalem was satisfied with the scattering, he wasn't. He went on the road to destroy the church wherever it tried to take root, his pockets full of arrest warrants, names of Christ followers. When he found them he dragged them from their houses to prison, *breathing threats and murder*, Luke says.

He was a zealot. A religious extremist, even. Every religion has them: Jewish, Muslim, Christian. You've heard of the Crusades, right? What makes someone a zealot? That we disagree with him or her, right? Otherwise they're heroes.

Saul chased Christ-followers to Damascus. Where is Damascus? In Syria, where he knew Christ-followers had fled to hide among other Jews there. On the way, he's struck to the ground by the Risen Christ who speaks to him from heaven. His companions hear the voice but see nothing, implying that Saul – who was struck blind – CAN see. Constantly in Luke, *seeing with one's eyes* has nothing to do with sight but everything to do with faith.

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul wants to know, answering his own question. *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city and you will be told what to do.”* His friends lead him by the hand to the house of a man named Judas who lived on Straight Street.

I just love how Luke gives us almost NO details about the Jesus encounter but a precise description of where Saul was taken in Damascus: a house where Saul sits – blind as a mole; helpless as a kitten; eating nothing, drinking nothing, doing nothing but pray – for three days.

Why the fasting, do you suppose? Judas was probably a Christian, right? Saul was orthodox – extremely so. He wouldn't have touched any food in that house. I expect

Luke also means to allude to Jesus' burial – the three days between His death and resurrection.

Meanwhile the Lord was off finding a Christian willing to go visit him. His name is Ananias, a cameo character. We know nothing about him before or after this scene, only that he has a supremely important job in the history of the church. The job? Go visit Saul and deliver the will of God for his life: he is to *take the name of Jesus to the Gentiles and kings and to the people of Israel*.

At first Ananias doubts the wisdom of this plan. *Err, you do know who this guy is – right, Lord? The same guy arresting everyone in Jerusalem who even says your name?* “Go!” the Lord said. So Ananias went. Which I think must have been super awkward for everyone, most of all Saul, the one so used to running his own show. Lost as a goose for three days; and who comes to help but one of the very people he'd been out to destroy?

Ananias speaks to him. His sight returns. He is baptized. He eats. He spends time with the believers in Damascus; and immediately, Luke says, Saul begins to preach in the synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God. And the rest, as they say, is history. Church history, written originally for a church struggling to stay alive in a world that considered the church dangerous:

- ~ religiously dangerous because it threatened Jewish purity;
- ~ politically dangerous because it threatened Roman pacificity.

The struggle is different for us, the modern church in the West. Ours is the struggle to stay relevant. Does Acts 9 have a helpful word for us? I would say “Yes” – with a single qualification: “Yes, insofar as we are still interested in conversion, specifically, the conversion of the human heart from the separation of the human heart from the Risen Christ to the joining of the human heart and the Risen Christ.”

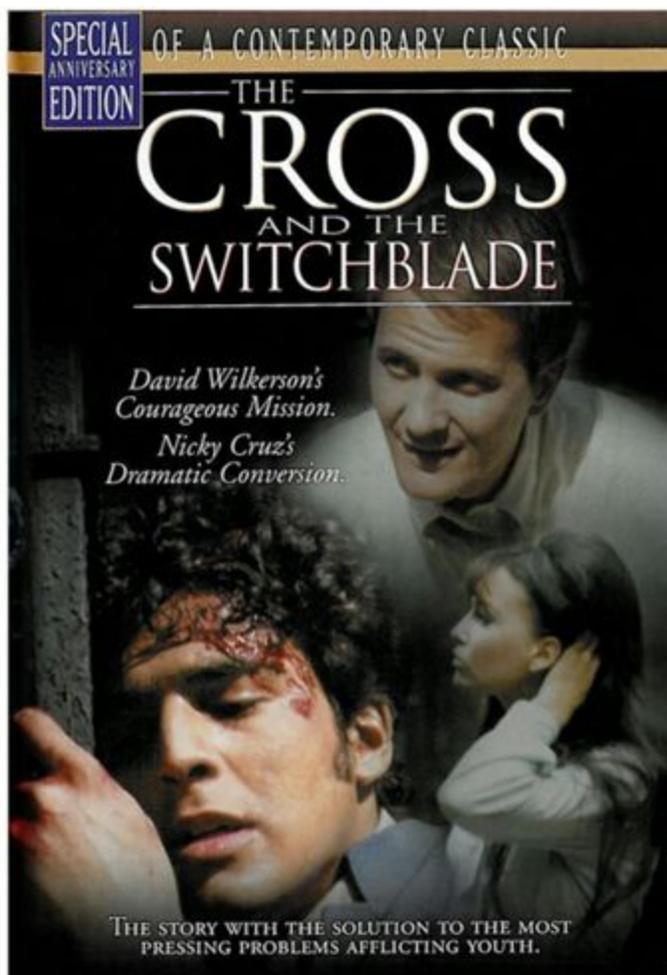
Conversion for Saul/Paul – “Spaul” – was both a radical life change and hardly anything at all, really. It was hardly anything at all in the sense that before his conversion Spaul was already a profoundly religious person. He was a Pharisee, a student and teacher of Jewish law. He loved his religion. Morality and righteousness were important to him. He was devout. He prayed. None of those things changed after he met Christ. Temperamentally – before he came to Christ – Spaul was already also high-handed, hardworking, productive, and tireless. He consistently chose the harder, riskier tasks. He knew everything better than everybody else. None of which changed upon his conversion. FAITH was for him a way of living, not just a way of talking. Faith in the God of Israel was who he was, not just how he described himself.

Or, insofar as he changed, the change was only the slightest turning. Interestingly, even the project of his life was the same: the church of Jesus Christ. First he set out to

destroy it. In the end, he gave his life to establish it. That makes the conversion radical. Converted. Everything changed.

Where Saul had argued to keep the law pure at all costs, Paul preached grace, grace, and more grace. Saul wanted people jailed and murdered; Paul offered them life. Saul cared about Jews; Paul loved Jews and Greeks, men and women, slave and free.

But here's what's funny to me. Acts, chapter 9 – the conversion of Saul to Paul – the second most important story in the New Testament – it is THE story upon which the 20th century Protestant evangelical church sculpted THE theology of conversion by which all of our conversions have been measured since. Our revivals, altar calls, even our hymnody, are rooted in an idea of conversion in which a human being has a moment-in-time experience to which he or she may refer for a lifetime as THE moment in which he or she was saved. As though every Christian since Paul either was, or should have been, saved exactly as him.



Do you recognize this movie poster? I cut my Christian teeth on *The Cross and the Switchblade*, when I was in seventh grade. Nicky Cruz, played by baby Erik Estrada – he was like Donny Osmond, only Christian. No one came out and said so, but it was understood that the authenticity of one's faith was proportional to the dreadfulness of one's life before conversion.

That dreadfulness might have been innocent tragedy, like having cancer, or personal atrocity – being a gang-banger like Nicky. Nicky Cruz was so GOOD precisely because he had been so BAD.

And I show it to you because it was fun remembering it, looking it up again, showing you this picture. But also to say that not everybody has the privilege of being a gangbanger before she gets out of seventh grade. And that's really, really okay.

Because conversion isn't something we do. It's something Jesus did – for Saul on the road; for the 12-year-old growing up at First Baptist Church, Bedford, Indiana.

We are born not knowing that He has broken the power of death to make us afraid of anything ever. And however we come to know it – *knocked off a high horse on a Syrian backroad*, as Flannery O'Connor said it, or from a string of Sunday School teachers – isn't important. As the Reverend Dr. Willimon said, “*conversion is to be approached by the Risen Christ and to be changed by the encounter.*”^[2]

It may be dramatic or quiet. All at once or over years and years. It's nothing to do with how good or bad we were – or are – before the Lord got hold of us, but that the Lord got hold of us at all – which is the miracle. So that a 12-year-old girl, who likes Donny Osmond and makes good grades, when she gives her heart to Jesus has nothing to be embarrassed about at youth camp or in a seminary classroom or a preacher prayer breakfast. As our resident theologian, Bill Coverdale, always says, “It's not a contest.”

Conversion is not a contest. It's a miracle – and a gift. It brought us together, didn't it?

^[1] William Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) p.78.

^[2] Willimon, p. 79.