

## Paul: The Model Conversion

### Acts 9

Paul's conversion story is the most dramatic and well-known in all of Christianity. It has a prominent place in Scripture where it is recorded three times in detail; Acts 9:1-22, Acts 22:1-21, Acts 26:1-18, is summarized in Gal 1:13-17, and is referred to in 1 Cor. 15:8-10 and Phil.3:4-11.

It is a unique conversion story in many ways; few if any Christians have ever had an identical experience. What are we to make of this conversion story, referred to many times in the New Testament?

We can either understand it as **history**, one individual's unique encounter with Christ...without any implications for ourselves, or we can see it as **a prototype, a pattern, a model** of conversion.

Just as we have seen Stephen as The Model Witness and Phillip as The Model Evangelist, today we are going to look at Paul, the Model Conversion. We want to see what conversion looks like according to Paul's own experience, and see if our own understanding of conversion fits the Pauline pattern.

#### I. The Context

In writing the book of Acts, Luke does not start his introduction of this character named Saul while Saul is on the Damascus Road. Instead, Luke provides us with some background material so we have a framework in place before we get to Acts 9.

In Acts 7:58, Scripture introduces us to a young man named Saul who stood and guarded the coats of those stoning Stephen. This small but significant detail lets us know that Saul was a witness to the martyrdom of "The Model Witness" – Stephen.

That means he watched Stephen die, he saw Stephen fall on his knees as the rocks were flying, and right there in the midst of such violence and hatred, Stephen calls out "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit, and then he even asks God not to hold their sin against them!

After seeing that, some men may have **regretted** Stephen's death, but Luke tells us in Acts 8:1 that Saul actually **rejoiced in it**. After Stephen's death, a great persecution of the church began and many believers scattered to Judea and Samaria.

In Acts 8:3 we learn that Saul was no longer on the sidelines merely guarding coats for zealous stone throwers, but now he is personally engaged in a house to house search to hunt down Christian men and women and have them put in prison.

Acts 26:9-11 gives us a good picture of what Saul was thinking and feeling during this time in his life:

*"So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being **furiously enraged** at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities. (NASB)*

The NIV says in Acts 26:11 that Saul had an "obsession against them." The words that Paul used to describe himself could also be translated "**super abundantly enraged**" or "**mad beyond measure**" or "**raving like a maniac**."

So intense and effective was Saul's' persecution of believers that Scripture records in Acts 8:3 that Saul began to destroy (NIV), ravage (NASB), make havoc (KJV), lay waste (ASV), devastate (NLT), the church!

And now this young Pharisee was on his way to Damascus, 150 miles north of Jerusalem, armed with a search warrant and determined to hunt down disciples.

## II. The Conversion

Acts 9:1-22, Acts 26:13-20

These texts show us that while on his way to imprison those who belonged to "the Way," Saul had a divine encounter with Jesus Christ that was powerful, personal, profound and permanent. It marked a distinct turning point in Saul's life. Something happened to Saul that he never recovered from, something marked in him a distinct "before" and a definite "after," something occurred in Saul's life that changed his direction, turned him around, and transformed Saul from a:

- **Destroyer** of the faith into a **Defender** of the faith
- **Murderer** into a **Minister**
- **Persecutor** into a **Pastor**
- **Enemy** into an **Evangelist**
- **Punisher** into a **Prophet**
- **Raving zealot** into a **Redeemed servant**

Paul **was converted!**

## Conversion defined

We get our English word conversion from the combination of two Latin words: “verto” which means to turn, and “con” which attaches a strength and intensity to the turning. So we see that conversion implies **a thorough turning** or a **turning completely around**.

The Greek word used in the New Testament to convey this idea of conversion, of turning from sin and turning to God, is “strepho” (stref'-o) which means “to twist, i.e. turn quite around,” or “to reverse.”

The Hebrew word for turning to God and hence turning from sin is shuwb (shoob) meaning “to turn back” or “to turn away.”

## Conversion displayed

Paul’s life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ provides us with a model conversion. It serves as a model because it so powerfully portrays the essence of what it means for a person to be converted, which is to have their life direction turned around by experiencing new life through Jesus Christ.

Jesus turned Paul completely around, from being a man-hunter to being a soul-winner.

Jesus commissioned Paul with these words found in his testimony to King Agrippa in Acts 26:16-18:

*16 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.  
17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'* NIV

Paul knew that his conversion was part of God’s plan to convert others.

Conversion as modeled by Paul includes an understanding that God wants to use you and me (the converted) as His instruments in the conversion of others.

## Conversion described

Verse 18 describes three basic components of conversion:

- 1) **Insight**: blind eyes need to be opened.
- 2) **Response**: a turning from and a turning to.
- 3) **Transformation**: a new relationship with God through faith in Christ.

In the context of Acts 26, is Paul sharing his conversion story with the goal of converting King Agrippa and anyone else who was in attendance. Paul understood that God will use our personal testimony to help open the eyes of people so that they can begin to turn toward the Lord and come to faith in Christ.

You and I, as new creatures in Christ, have a personal conversion story that God can use to help others see Christ. Paul told his story everywhere, and it was **prepared**, **short**, and **focused**.

In an earlier lesson, Pastor Stan provided us with this helpful outline of Paul's conversion story:

a. My life before Christ.

- I had a religious upbringing and education.
- I was obsessed in my hatred of Christianity.
- I did everything I knew to exterminate Christians from the face of the earth.
- I helped to kill Stephen.
- I practiced religion but had no inner peace.

b. How I met Christ.

- When? About noon.
- Where? On a road near Damascus.
- What happened? A light. A voice. I suddenly realized the error of my ways!
- Jesus met me! He spoke words of peace.
- Jesus said he had a plan for my life.
- I surrendered my will to His! I turned from my sin and put my faith in Jesus Christ.

c. My life since I met Christ.

- I have told this story to everyone who will listen.
- I have not been disobedient to the heavenly vision.
- I have been His witness before Jews, Gentiles, kings, and princesses.
- I have suffered for the sake of his Name.

## Table Talk

Using Paul's story as a model, can you describe your conversion story?

\* **Life before Christ**

What was your religious background, if any?

What role did God have in your life?

What were your feelings about heaven, hell, sin, the Bible, Christians?

What made you open to consider the Gospel?

\* **Your conversion to Christ**

When were you converted?

Where did your conversion take place?

Who did God use to speak to you?

What did you "see" at that time that you had been "blind" to before?

How did you respond to your new insight?

What did you understand you were doing?

\* **Life since Christ**

In what ways has your life been "turned around" since your conversion?

How are you a different person inwardly?

How are you a different person outwardly?

### III. Conclusions

Using scriptural truths in general and Paul's conversion specifically, we can conclude seven truths about conversion.

**A. Conversion is an act of God**

Was Paul seeking a relationship with Jesus Christ?

or

Was Jesus Christ seeking a relationship with Paul?

Paul's conversion was the grace of God in action. Your conversion was also the grace of God in action.

Jesus said *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.* John 6:44 NIV

*Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.* John 3:5-6 NIV

You did not simply “decide” to become a Christian on your own; God’s Spirit was at work, convicting, convincing and converting you.

Dr. David Wells, Academic Dean at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, points out that God is at work in every Christian conversion in at least three senses:

- 1) Without God’s saving action in Christ, conversion would **not be possible**.
- 2) Without the Holy Spirit, conversion would **not be desirable**.
- 3) Without the function of the Scriptures, conversion would **not be Christian**.

Paul’s conversion story is a model of God’s grace. Instead of punishing Paul for his vicious attacks, Jesus revealed Himself to Paul, redeemed him and recruited him into His service.

## **B. Conversion requires man’s response**

Even in Paul’s conversion, complete with the blinding light of heaven, a dialogue with Jesus in the Hebrew language, the three-day experience of blindness and Ananias praying over him to receive his sight, still Paul reports in Acts 26:19 that he was not **disobedient** to the vision. This indicates that Paul had a role in his conversion; he chose to respond by obeying what God said.

At Pentecost, Peter told those who were pierced to the heart:

***“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.***  
Acts 2:38, 40-41

Peter’s second sermon again addresses the need of people to respond to God’s grace: ***“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...”***  
Acts 3:19 NKJV

Peter expected them to respond to the Gospel invitation.

Man’s role in conversion is to repent and believe.

### C. Conversion changes people

It has been noted that many who claim to have had a conversion experience show very little actual change.

In his book **I Surrender**, Patrick Morley writes that the church's problem is in the misconception "that we can **add Christ** to our lives, but not **subtract sin**. It is a change **in belief** without a change **in behavior**."

Dr. David Wells laments that:

“To our shame, we have almost stood the New Testament on its head. Ours has become an anemic gospel that demands little of the convert in terms of repentance and obedience, and consequently Christ receives little from us by way of commitment and service.”(International Journal of Frontier Missions, Vol.16:4, Winter 1999/2000)

This problem is not new to our generation, however, as these comments by George Whitefield (1714-1770) indicate:

“ There are so many stony ground hearers who receive the Word with joy that I have determined to suspend my judgment till I know the tree by its fruits ...Do you think any farmer would have a crop of corn next year unless he plowed now? You may as well expect a crop of corn on unplowed ground as a crop of grace until the soul is convinced of its being undone without a Savior. That is the reason we have so many mushroom converts, so many persons that are always happy! happy! happy! and never were miserable. Why? Because their stony ground is not plowed up; they have not got a conviction of the law . . . they fall away . . . That makes me so cautious now, which I was not thirty years ago, of dubbing converts too soon. Now I wait a little, and see if people bring forth fruit; for there are so many blossoms which the March winds blow away that I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought forth.”

Paul's conversion model is the picture of change. His change in attitude resulted in changed actions. His new belief produced new behavior.

That was not unique to Paul; he expected conversion to produce evidence.

In Acts 26:20 he instructed the Gentiles to:

- 1) Repent
- 2) Turn to God
- 3) Perform deeds appropriate to repentance

In Luke 19:8-10, Jesus affirms Zacchaeus's conversion after Zacchaeus clearly showed a change in both his attitude and action.

*... Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."*

True conversion will bring true change.

#### **D. Conversion involves Community**

True conversion will connect us with other believers. Christians are born into the family of God, and true converts will desire to be with other Christians. The Spirit of God leads believers into community, not into isolation.

Paul's conversion models this. Jesus instructed Paul to go into Damascus and wait for further instructions. In the meantime, Jesus instructed Ananias to go lay hands on Paul so that Paul could see. Jesus did not need Ananias to pray over Saul; Jesus could have appeared to him again and removed the blindness. Jesus deliberately orchestrated a connection between Paul and Ananias, Paul's introduction into the community of believers.

*They **devoted themselves** to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 **All the believers were together** and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 **Every day they continued to meet together** in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and **ate together** with glad and sincere hearts, Acts 2:42-46*

While conversion is a **personal, individual experience**, it is not a **private, isolated experience**.

Conversion involves community.

#### **E. Conversion leads to baptism**

If Paul's conversion is the model, then conversion involves baptism.

*Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. **He got up and was baptized**, Acts 9:18*

*And now what are you waiting for? Get up, **be baptized** and wash your sins away, calling on his name.' Acts 22:16*

Acts contains numerous examples of baptism following conversion:

*But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*  
Acts 8:12

*As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.* Acts 8:36-38

Other examples are Lydia in Acts 16:15, the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:33 and Crispus, the synagogue ruler in Acts 18:8.

Of course, Jesus Himself instituted the baptism of converts in Matt 28:19.

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*

The biblical pattern is that conversion leads to baptism.

## **F. Conversion continues**

Typically, we tend to think that conversion is something a Christian experiences only once. Jim Jordan, in his book *The Sociology of the Church*, broadens our concept of conversion when he suggests that for a Christian there are four kinds of conversion experiences.

### **1) The Initial Conversion**

That moment in time when we passed from unbelief to belief, from being alienated from God to being adopted by God, from being dead in our sins and trespasses to being born-again.

For Paul, that initial conversion happened on the Damascus Road around noontime. Some of us may know the exact time and place, while others may point to a more extended season of time during which they entered into new life in Christ and therefore were not the same person they used to be.

### **2) Daily Conversion**

Every day we have an opportunity and an obligation to turn from temptation, from sinful tendencies, from our own selfishness and turn back to Christ.

*Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.* Luke 9:23 NIV

### 3) Crisis Conversions

Every Christian will experience crisis points in their life. At these crisis points, the Christian needs to reaffirm their faith by making a major break with whatever problem has crept into their lives, and make a major turn toward Jesus Christ. (The Revival caused many to turn to the Lord in new ways)

### 4) Stage Conversions

All of us are functioning in different stages of life, and these stages influence and change us:

- Marriage will bring change
- Raising children will bring change
- Being committed and connected to a local church will bring change
- Working with and for others will bring change
- Growing older will bring change

God often uses these stages of life to lead us into deeper stages of maturity. As a Christian goes through these stages, their view of God, of themselves, of the church, and of the world will change because they themselves are changing. Has your view of God, yourself, sin, the church, and your role in God's mission on earth changed in the last year? Last five years?

Each stage involves a deeper understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Each stage invites us to once again **give all we are** to God, **turn it all over** to Him, with a new and expanded understanding of what **“all” really means**.

Luther considered conversion (a turning back to God) as a proper daily activity for the believer.

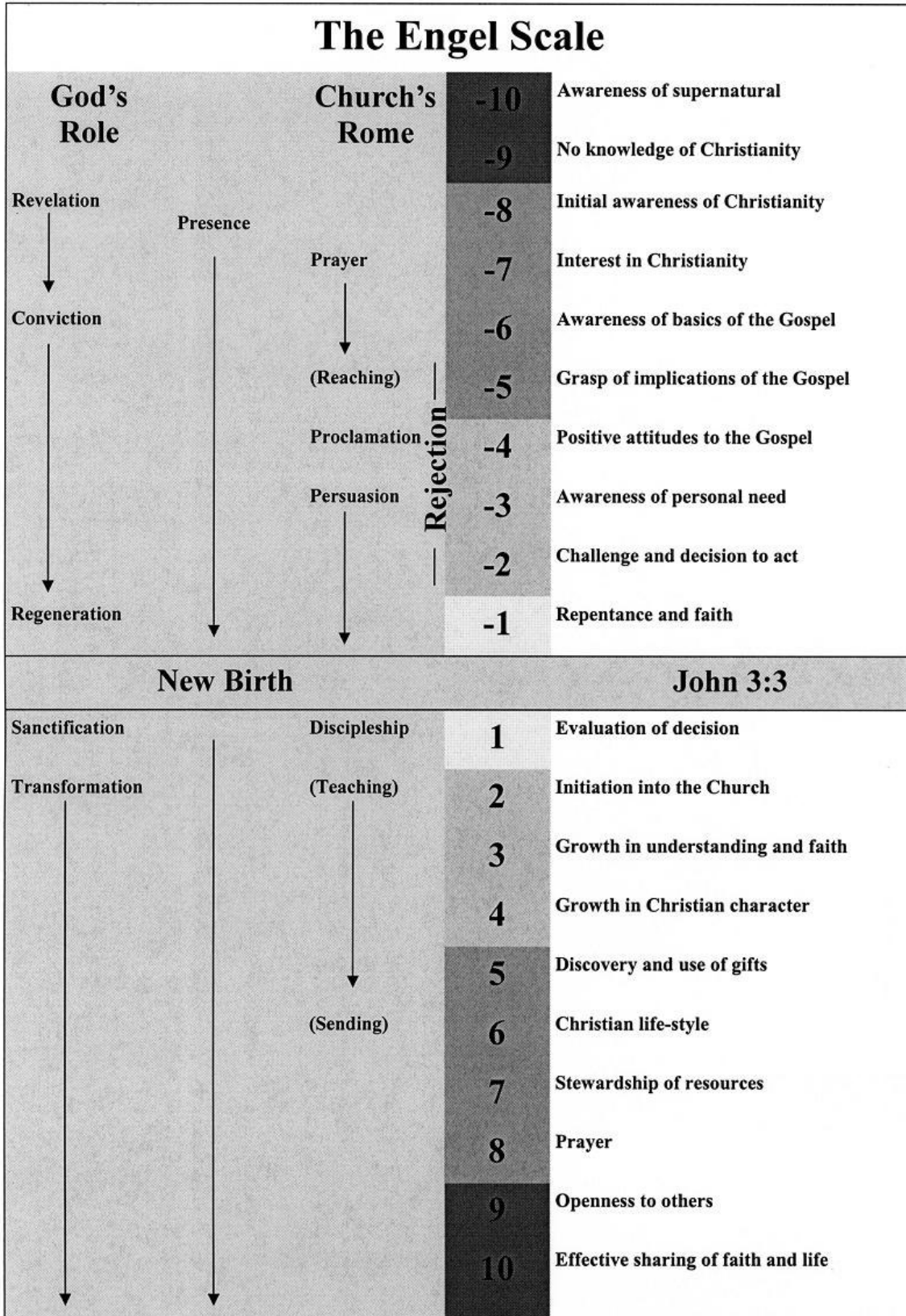
Scripture does not teach that we need repeated regeneration, but we do need to repeatedly “turn to” the Lord as we become aware of our sin, our shortcomings, our selfishness.

*I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes. Ps.119:59*

*Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Lam 3:40*

*Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins. James 5:19-20 KJV*

## G. Conversion is an event amidst a process



## Appendix

### Conversion is necessary to enter God's Kingdom

While this seems obvious to us, the necessity of conversion is not a fundamental belief among all who call themselves Christian.

Hans Küng, an influential liberal theologian, explains that the role of the missionary is not that of changing the belief structure of all the nations of the world to conform to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; rather, he must show how the Gospel of Jesus Christ can "challenge" the Buddhist, the Hindu or the Moslem, enriching his belief structure by sort of "spicing it up" with some of the Gospel sayings. *Conversion* of the heart is no longer needed, just an *acceptance* of the Gospel as one religious system among others.

This acceptance of the Gospel without requiring a conversion by the Gospel is in stark contrast to Matt 18:2-3:

*"Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are **converted** and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." NKJV*

### Conversion is commanded

*Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?' Ezek. 33:11 NIV*

### Conversion pleases God

*Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? Ezek. 18:23 NIV*

*I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*