

Basics of the Faith: Conversion
Acts 9:1-20
August 16, 2020

Sometimes when I happen to be in Toronto I deliberately go back to the area where I lived when I first came to Canada. I drive around trying to locate the house where I had boarded and then make my way to the street where I had lived with my brother and his family in the west end of Toronto. It all seemed so long ago now and I had strong feelings of nostalgia as I sat there gazing at the house. Across the street stood the little Gospel Hall where sixty years ago this coming November I became a Christian. That conversion experience shaped the rest of my life.

Although I grew up within the stately spires of Scottish Kirk and attended Sunday School, my faith was born in that Gospel Hall in West Toronto and pinpointed on a certain day, month and year on a calendar. The preacher was an old man who had worked for fifty years in Steelco and had started this small church in the west end of Toronto. There my older brother was converted upon arrival in Toronto and three years later I too walked down the aisle to the invitation to receive Jesus as my Saviour. In my early teens I had rejected Christianity and the church, opting for a life free of the church's influence.

One day stands out in my memory. I happened to meet our minister as I was walking down the street. The manse was at the end of the street where we lived. He asked me when he would see me in church again. I told him, as rudely as I could, that he would never see me again. After I became a Christian I thought about this encounter and wished someday I could apologize and tell him what I had experienced. Regrettably I never had that opportunity. He probably didn't think I was a very good candidate for faith then. But God in mercy found me, as God has found many of us wanderers. What is interesting, as I think back on all this, is that my conversion experience in Canada was as about as unlikely to happen in that Scottish Kirk culture as me becoming a minister of the Gospel. Not impossible, but unlikely!

Three times in the book of Acts we hear the story of Paul's conversion. It is a dramatic and compelling story. We are introduced to a man on a search and destroy mission. We are told at the beginning of chapter eight that Paul was, "*ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.*" He is determined to silence this new religion of Jesus. So he obtains letters from the high priest in Jerusalem to the synagogues in Damascus permitting him to conduct his campaign of terror. There he will root out men and women who belong to "the Way." He is described as a man who "breathes threats and murder". His only personal reminiscence of this event is found in Galatians: "*I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.*" (Galatians 1:13)

It's high noon and in that part of the world the sun is unrelenting and to be avoided at all costs. I remember on our visit to Turkey a few years ago we were down at the Mediterranean resort of Anatalya. Just a short bus ride away stand the ruins of Perge where Paul had preached. It was August and we were told that we needed to be there before nine in the morning and out of there by noon as it was simply too oppressive by the afternoon. The guide was right. Paul and his companions apparently show no signs of exhaustion for they are still marching on at noon under the blaze of the sun. That detail alone might tell us something of Paul's intensity. But suddenly a light even brighter than that noonday sun stops Paul in his tracks and literally knocks him over. A voice asks why he is persecuting him. It is the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth who speaks and who identifies himself so intimately with his followers that he can speak of their persecution as his.

Conversion is not a word we as Presbyterians are terribly comfortable with. Cradled as we are within our rites of baptism, confirmation and membership, our faith stories are more likely to tell of gradual growth than dramatic conversion. Indeed, it's safe to say that conversion is not part of our religious language or experience. It belongs to the more enthusiastic groups of Baptists, Pentecostalist to use the "born again" language. Mainline faith finds such an emphasis almost vulgar. We are even nervous about any sort of God-talk that might be construed as religious enthusiasm or even worse, fanaticism.

I have to say that my conversion experience was quite extraordinary. I remember it vividly; it felt like I was floating on air for months after. You couldn't keep me away from church after that. I remember saying to the minister and his wife one Sunday after church how I couldn't wait for the next meeting which was our Wednesday Prayer service. But new birth, as I was to discover, is only the beginning of a relationship which in time matures, changes and develops. In time I found my way back to my roots in the Reformed tradition. But I think it worth noting, never as one who simply went through the system of baptism, confirmation, membership. Always that dramatic conversion would be, for me, the shaping experience of my life, no matter how my life developed. So although I am a person who is comfortable within the Reformed tradition, both by temperament and education, I am also decidedly uncomfortable with sterile, bland, official Presbyterianism that finds security within the covenant and practice of baptism, confirmation and membership.

We Presbyterians like to speak of our religious experience in less dramatic terms, such as nurture from cradle to grave. How to fit conversion into the Mainline religious world of language and experience, dominated by themes of nurture, is, as I see it, a serious problem for us. It seems to me that we are less equipped to witness good news than our brothers and sisters in the more conservative wings of the church. And in our hesitation, we find our denomination shrinking at an alarming rate. The tragedy is that we have so much to offer out of that Reformed faith.

None of the reformers from Calvin to John Knox would have any problem with conversion language and practice. Like the Reformers, we can shape our congregations in the Reformed faith that includes the central truth of conversion. Somehow, we need to learn to include the need for new birth into our theology of baptism, sacraments and membership. We simply haven't done a good job of integrating it into our worship and education. Stepping into the world of faith in Jesus, at least according to Jesus and the New Testament, demands conversion, whether sudden, as in my case, or gradual, whether it affects us emotionally and/or intellectually. But it cannot be avoided without losing the heart of the Gospel message!

Malcolm Muggeridge in his book, **Conversion**, speaks of his spiritual journey as “more a series of happenings than one single dramatic one.” He acknowledges that dramatic conversion does happen, as did to the Apostle Paul on the Damascus road. Indeed, he often himself prayed for such a dramatic moment in his life. He does remember moments of insight such as the time he was filming **The Holy Land** during which he visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Here he had a mystical experience, his first intimation of conversion. He sat in the shadows of the crypt waiting for the time when it would be closed to the public. As he waited, he thought how ridiculous such shrines were and how pathetic it was that people actually took them seriously. But then he began to notice the people’s faces and demeanor as they knelt before the spot where their Lord was said to have been born. He witnessed their transformed faces and he sensed that truly God was there for them. He too felt it.

There have been many who have experienced new birth, some after years of searching and struggle. People like C.S. Lewis and Augustine, found their way into God’s kingdom kicking and screaming. How is your journey going? Where is your heart today?

It is surely no accident that there is a play on the word “way” in Luke’s story. Paul is going to Damascus to arrest any who are of “the Way”. This is probably the earliest description of the followers of Jesus. They were people who followed the “way” of Jesus. There is a real sense here of the intersection of two ways. It is, if you like, Paul’s arrival at the crossroads. Paul has found the way of Christ, which stands in marked contrast to the way he is following. Each of us arrive at these crossroads. Churches also reach these crossroads.

The way of Christ asks us, not for a casual nod in the direction of a religious affiliation, but for our heart. But I suspect that our past history as a church at the centre of our social world, along with our emphasis on nurture not conversion, have combined to confuse and blur the picture. We may have drifted into the notion that our morality and social correctness are sufficient to satisfy the criteria of the New Testament on what “being Christian” means. But a closer reading of such stories as the one before us tells us that the lines are drawn

much more sharply than we are accustomed to draw them.

But believe me this is a world that is lost forever. No longer will our churches grow from the same basis as they did even fifty years ago. Then it was socially respectable to belong to church. Now for the bulk of our population it is deemed irrelevant. Those who grace our pews in the future will be there because of a search for a new beginning, for faith, for hope. They will choose to be there. So, we had better get prepared for the revolution to come. We had better start learning the language of the New Testament and living its experience or we will find ourselves, no longer mainline, but sideline. Conversion, as Jesus himself said to Nicodemus, is the entry point into the kingdom. It marks the beginning of the journey. It is God's encounter of us. Set my heart on fire, says John Dunne. Set it on fire indeed!

Amen