

Conversion

(From the Epistle & Gospel of the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul)

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 231

Acts ix. 20 And straightway [Saul] preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. 21 But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? 22 But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.

Matt. xix. 27 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?

Conversion, as we all know, is a term very central to any discussion of the Christian faith. It is an extremely important word, because it defines a process which is unique to following Christ. It can be spoken of in many ways: spiritual rebirth, or being born again; complete renewal; an absolute and irreversible movement from spiritual death to spiritual life, and in similar terms, all implying a change virtually absolute in magnitude.

We see this process so well exemplified in today's Epistle. St. Paul is transformed, within a few short days, from a sworn enemy of the faith, to one of its principal evangelists and promoters. It is a remarkable change, and any efforts to describe it in psychological terms, or to attribute it to natural causes, fall absolutely flat. It is the consequence of divine power acting upon the spirit and soul of a man. We see this same remarkable alteration in Christ's disciples on the day of Pentecost, as described in Acts 2. It has always been the mark and evidence of true faith.

Conversion sets belief in Christ apart from every other religion, because its consequence is the creation of something brand new out of that which was old, and spiritually dead. A man may become religious for many reasons: out of a burdened conscience, or because family and society expect it of him, or because he wishes to become a better person. But all of these, even though admirable, do not necessarily result in conversion. That remains solely the province of God, who alone can perform it.

Clubs have initiation rites. Oaths are taken or vows made. Sacrifices of one sort or another may be demanded. There may be a membership fee, or some great price to be paid for entry. But all of these are transactions among men. And none of them involve the death to sin and self, and the rising to new life in Christ, which is the bottom line for entry into God's Kingdom.

But how does conversion translate itself into our own personal experience? Few of us, it would seem, have had this sort of dramatic change with such remarkable results when it comes to our own faith experience. My own story involved this kind of abrupt alteration, as did that of most of those who came to Christ in the same circumstances I did. But what of so many others, for whom church and all things Christian have virtually always been a part of their lives?

First, it has to be affirmed that the terms of conversion must be in place for every sincere believer, and to the same degree. Only converts will go to heaven. There will be no half-baked followers of the Lord there, who have named their own conditions of discipleship. We see one of these requirements reflected in today's Gospel: *forsaking all*. This has an almost chillingly severe ring to it, doesn't it? But in practical terms, it means something that has to be within the reach of every Christian, whether dramatically converted, or not. It is an attitude of mind and heart associated with all the elements that make up one's life. whether family, or possessions, or vocation, or of any number of other things that crowd to the fore to take up one's time and energy, and to literally crowd Christ out. For some, to fulfill this calling may mean an actual and literal renunciation of everything. This may lead them to a life of consecrated religious devotion, say, that of a nun, or a monk, or a hermit. But for the majority of us, *forsaking all* will be a matter of inner discipline. It will involve the way we order our priorities: What comes first? My wants and wishes? My cherished relationships? Or, my stern commitment to place the Lord's expectations before all others? And what does that mean? Surely it involves an effort to lead a holy life, to walk uprightly and blamelessly, to strive to be the best example I can, to guard my mouth, to redirect my thoughts if at all possible, in every circumstance, back to Christ. This is *forsaking all*, and is at least one of the terms of conversion to which we are all subject.

Next, it is exceedingly important to remind ourselves that although coming to Christ may involve for some the sort of distinctive initial experience that our Epistle describes, the process of conversion is ongoing. It is lifelong, and will only be completed when our time on earth is over. This should be of tremendous encouragement to us. We may feel that the standard set by St. Paul and the Apostles, following their own transformations, is much too high. They seem to move seamlessly from the grossly imperfect to the absolutely perfect. But this is not so, and the testimony of Scripture proves it:

(see, e.g., Philip. 3:12 and its context: *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...*; Romans 12:2, *be transformed*, which implies a continual process; and 1 Corinthians 1:18, in the New International and New King James versions: we are *being saved*).

This process of conversion involves every influence throughout life that God brings to bear upon us. He will use them all to the same end..., to conversion. For this reason, those of you who have been believers for many, many years should have much reason to rejoice. Although you may not be able to boast a dynamic testimony as in today's Epistle, you are nevertheless subject to the same process, even over time. And some day, if we continue in the process, we will all be privileged to behold in ourselves its final, intended consequence: *wonderful conversion* (from today's Collect).

The conversion of St. Paul resulted in great riches for the Church. But this came at the very considerable expense of the Apostle. He lost his position in the Jewish community and became a shameful outcast in their eyes. He gave up his settled place among them as a respected practitioner of the Law, with his fortune and future virtually secure, only to become an itinerant preacher of a despised and hated religion. He could use none of the collateral of his past for the new position to which he had been divinely appointed. He learned to say “goodbye” to just about everything, just as did the twelve disciples who also *forsook all* to follow Christ.

This was a heavy price for them all to pay. But it is one yet required of you and me, albeit on a very different level. But the consequence for us as well will be *an hundredfold*, along with *everlasting life*. If we remain unconverted, however, so in all likelihood will our spouses, our families, and all others who turn principally to us to see Jesus Christ.

So let’s examine ourselves. Do we see this dynamic process alive and active in our lives? Are we able to interpret the events of life in terms of what God is doing with us toward the end of converting us?

Questions not to be ignored.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.