

There is no conversion story in the Bible that is more famous or frequently alluded to in sermons than that of Saul on the Damascus Road. The very words, "Damascus Road" have become a kind of shorthand for conversion and all kinds of experiences of change, turning around, reorientation, coming to Christ, and transformation. It receives privileged status among all other conversion narratives for two good reasons; First is the frequency with which this story is told and retold in the Bible. In Acts alone, it is repeated twice more in Acts alone (Chapters 22 and 26), and number of times Paul refers to it other letters, including Galatians, 1 Corinthians. Second reason why this conversion story has arrested the attention of the church through the ages is the dramatic details of the story itself --- Blinding lights, the voice of Jesus, Saul's loss of sight and the dramatic recovery, and the dramatic transformation from a murderous persecutor of Christians to a evangelist to the Gentiles, makes for a fantastic story that demands curiosity at the very least.

The question we may ask ourselves this morning is this --- Is Saul's conversion story and experience a normative pattern for all Christians? Within the Christian traditions, particularly those traditions influenced by the Great Awakenings and shaped by revivalism, the dramatic events of conversion, of turning around, from "bad" to "good", or leading an "immoral life" to "upright Christian life --- straightening up and flying right", remains central, normative, and true mark of faith in Christ. But, what of those of us who grew up wholesomely in the church literally from birth and "nurtured gradually" into the Christian faith? We have never walked the "sawdust trail", or had to "swear off the bottle", and never had to make a vow to end all "philandering" in favor of an upright life. How does these dramatic conversion and transforming stories speak to us who never experienced similar conversion moments in our own journeys?

Understanding Saul's Conversion

Let me show you what Saul's conversion entailed, and through it, we might better understand what true conversion experiences are all about.

Paul (Saul) is not a man morally adrift or theologically confused and ignorant, he is hardly down and out. He is driven, determined, resolute and absolutely organized towards a singular mission --- to round up the follower of Jesus and bring them to trial. Paul was so completely absorbed in his own agenda that he could perceive nothing beyond "the self centered demands and agenda". In this he is "blind" --- blind to reality and truth beyond himself. Luther's classic definition of sin is, "The self curved in upon itself", and Paul is completely and utterly self-

absorbed in his own agenda and ignorance. For Paul, there is no other reality beyond himself.

In this un-converted state as the one who “sees’ and “knows”, is blinded and confused, Saul who has been in charge of his own life and others according to his own knowledge and agenda, now needs to be lead by others, like a little child. When his blindness, ignorance and self-centeredness is broken, another being is revealed as the center of his life – living Jesus.

This is the true heart of the all true conversion that leads to a total transformation --- when we ourselves are no longer our own truth and masters, but power and reality beyond ourselves becomes Lord and Master of our lives.

“Conversion in our own times may likewise entail an intrusion into and deliverance from our self-centered and self-absorbed construction of the self.”

Our Own Need for Conversion

But, we are not like Saul, are we? Are we in need of a conversion? We are not persecutors of others, I mean we are not a zealot like Saul was...

In the seminal analysis of the modern cultural condition, Philip Rieff, wrote a book called *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. In it, he depicts the state of the moderns as “*measuring all things according to the measure of man.*” We ask question like, “how does this enhance or benefit ME and MY life?” “How does this work for ME?” “How can this make life better or more comfortable or meaningful for ME?” “Does this meet MY needs?” The triumph of the therapeutic may mean that there is no reality beyond the self, no larger reality, no OTHER to whom we are accountable or to whom we turn to for meaning and purpose beyond my wants and needs --- therefore blind and ignorant as Saul was! Equally self-absorbed and turned in on ourselves as Saul was!

If we are to recover our sight to see the reality beyond me, we need the scales on our eyes to come off, we need someone to guide as by hand until we can see the ultimate truth that is to be revealed, and that truth is the living Christ, who speaks and reveals himself to us in most unexpected ways as he did on Damascus Road so long ago.

May the God of grace and transformations help us to meet Him on our journey!
Amen.

Personal Matter and Announcement

On March 9, after months of prayer and deliberations with my family, I regrettably sent a letter of my resignation from St. Andrew's to the Clerk of Presbytery. Let me read you a portion of that letter to announce to the congregation of my decision.

Dear, Rev. Delport, Clerk of Presbytery;

It is with regret and sadness that I send this letter of resignation from the charge of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Calgary, as the Minister of Vision and Direction.

I am sending this letter of resignation to you today after considerable discussion, reflection and prayer, not only with my family members, but also with a small group of elders of St. Andrew's, guided by the Rev. Helen Smith, who is responsible for Clergy Care within our Presbytery.

After intentional deliberations, I have decided to resign and return to Toronto to serve the needs of my wife and my three daughters, who, for variety of reasons, have expressed their desire to remain in Toronto to pursue their education and careers.

I cannot say enough about my time in St. Andrew's – their hospitality, generosity and passion for ministry has made my decision to leave all the more difficult. I am grateful for the trust and the support I have received and will forever remember my short, but, very rewarding time serving the congregation.

In consultation with the Rev. Helen Smith and the small advisory group, I have decided to advise the Session of my resignation in the March Session meeting in an effort to alleviate the increasing speculation about my future at St. Andrew's and also to let them know personally of my intentions.

I don't have the words to adequately express my feelings surrounding the decision. I am sorry that I cannot reciprocate the welcome, support and love I have received from you. I feel thankful and grateful for the opportunity to be a part of such a large and dynamic congregation, unique in so many ways in our declining denomination. I am confused why my call has turned out this way as I continue to experience, at least on my part, a sense of call to St. Andrew's. I will leave it to God to reveal the purposes and reasons behind these events to me and to my family in the coming days.

Thank you for the opportunity and the support!