

The Apostle Paul: Changing Names

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Text: Acts 9:1-22

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Acts 9:1-22

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.

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."

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.

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." 21 All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" 22 Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

You've probably heard the news: "Anne Rice has had a conversion: She's no longer a Christian..." Recently Rice posted on her Facebook account, "In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ...I quit being a Christian."

If you don't know the full story, you may think, as I did at first, "who cares?" You may think that anyways. But I suppose that for those who have followed Rice's soaring career writing vampire novels and who later converted or 'reverted' to her childhood faith in the Roman Catholic church and proceeded to re-invent a career in Christian-based novel writing, well, it seems that her most recent 'conversion' has caused quite a stir.

Bloggers and journalists of all types have been weighing in on her statement, some to question why she might not choose a different faith tradition that would allow her to hold those ideals she and remain in a Christian community, some to join her in denouncing the Christian faith, some to say "good riddance" to one who thinks she can say 'yes' to Christ while also saying 'yes' to the world and its values. Everyone seems to have an opinion.

It struck me while reading of Rice and the various responses to her 'conversion' that I could relate. Not only to her feelings about other Christians who preach hatred and exclusion but about scripture. I used to feel that way about Paul.

I didn't like him. I've never liked him, really. For much of my life as a Christian I was like many who would prefer to leave Paul out of the picture. I'd rather just focus on Jesus. After all, Jesus was the one who welcomed, healed, died for us. Jesus was the one who seemed to live a life of love, and not just talk about it. He was the radical rule breaker, the center of our faith.

Paul, on the other hand, seemed to be all about rules and regulations - don't drink or dance, don't marry unless you absolutely cannot control yourself, don't speak up in church. I'm sure you can imagine how much I liked the 'women be silent' line. I would point out that Paul never even met Jesus in person - he only saw him in a vision. Why do we give him so much power? Of all the things I could take or leave in scripture, Paul is one who I could leave. Paul was human; Christ was divine. I thought - I could be a Christ-follower and take Paul on my own terms. Paul was more like a secondary source who said some things that were worthwhile but other things I chalked up to culture and confusion.

What perhaps helped my impression is that Paul wasn't very likeable even in his own time. Almost every story about him gets him into trouble with someone. He spends much of his post-conversion life in jail. And his letters are often corrections and admonitions couched in words about love and unity. Paul infuriated Jews and Gentiles who had not accepted the gospel he proclaimed; And he frustrated Jews and Gentiles who were followers of Christ. Paul had made enemies of just about everyone.

But then, something changed for me. Something small.

Kathleen Norris writes that the word "conversion" comes from the Latin for "to turn around." Thus, she says, it denotes a change of perspective but not of essence: a change of view but not location.ⁱ And, while neither Paul, nor Acts ever says the word "conversion," I think this is a bit of what Paul went through.

Even after his time in Damascus, he was passionate and stubborn, determined and fierce. Perhaps Paul didn't come as far as we imagine from the man who was determined and impassioned against the disciples of the Lord, he simply turned that passion in a different direction.

Paul also began a Jew, and considered himself a Jew till the end. While he parted ways from the Jews of his time that refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, he was always in conversation with the Jewish faith he had known his whole life. In his letter to the Romans Paul expresses deep concern for Israel in light of the new revelation in Christ. While he considered it his divine calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul's Jewish-ness was evident in his understanding of Christ and Salvation.

Maybe Paul's change was subtler than we imagine.

Conversion stories seem to be a dime a dozen at the bookstore these days. Over the last few months I've read two, and I know there are several more on the bestseller list. Lately it seems that everyone has a story about how they've left the faith as a child or grew up an atheist only to return after some hardship or pain, and had their own Damascus Road Experience.

Many of these stories begin in a similar way - with a vast description of how life was before they became a Christian. Some begin with addiction of some kind, others with tales of their or their family's staunch paganism. Like Paul's conversion many of them have a certain moment where they were knocked off their feet, so to speak. The book I most recently devoured is the spiritual memoir by Sara Miles. When Miles writes of the beginning of her conversion she writes,

“It made no sense. I was in tears and physically unbalanced: I felt as if I had just stepped off a curb or been knocked over, painlessly, from behind.”

I wonder if that’s a bit of what Paul felt, when he was blinded and led to Damascus, what he felt after hearing the voice of Jesus naming Paul as his persecutor: “Saul, Saul, Why are you persecuting me?” I wonder if he was shaky even before he fasted for days and saw a vision of a well-known disciple of Jesus healing his blindness. Because even if it was just a change in perspective, “Any sort of change can be scary... Too sudden a turn, too quick a spin, and we can’t adjust to what our eyes are telling us. We lose our balance.”ⁱⁱ

When I arrived at seminary at Princeton, I thought I had a lot figured out. Not everything, but a lot. I was a progressive-liberal and I knew it. Growing up in Western Michigan had gotten me accustomed to being one of the few liberals Christians in the room, so seminary felt familiar. The struggles I had gone through in high school and college with more conservative Christians had only reinforced my inner calling that the Church needed more people like me.

So I began seminary by trying to seek out like-minded Christians, progressive in their politics and theology. It wasn’t easy. As another of my favorite memoir writers once said, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."ⁱⁱⁱ In spite of myself, I found myself thrown in with Christians of all types and backgrounds, some more conservative, some more liberal. And slowly I was forced to come to grips with the fact that I live only one of a great variety of ways to follow Jesus.

At one point I was asked to represent a liberal interpretation of a hot-button theological issue on a panel, and found myself trying to articulate my beliefs in the midst of some very intelligent thinkers with very different opinions. One of the others on the panel, a PhD student named Scott, represented the conservative interpretation. We disagreed, openly and a bit vehemently, in front of a large group of the student body.

A few days later, Scott found me in the campus bookstore where I worked. He was genuine, friendly. He invited me to be a part of a group of young, pastorally minded friends with all sorts of different theological stripes, to continue the conversation on this issue. I accepted. When we gathered together we worshiped, we prayed, we studied. We kept talking. We found that our common ground somehow outweighed our differences. We glimpsed a vision of God that was beyond what we might imagine ourselves.

In my time of knowing and loving Christians who believe far different things than I do, I’ve found my faith grown in ways I’ve never expected. I’ve been

turned around, fallen off balance, corrected and converted. And I could not imagine being faithful without their presence in the community of believers.

There are theological, political, social issues that pull Christians apart all the time. Anne Rice mentioned only a few of them in her reason for leaving the community of believers in favor of going it alone. The issues are alive and well at dissonance in the Presbyterian church: apparent this past month at our General Assembly where they addressed issues like the definition of marriage, the ordination of homosexuals, the conflict in the middle east, and health insurance. These don't even mention the things that divide us from Christians of other denominations and traditions. There are things that many of you might disagree with me on. But, the God who unites us is so much bigger than the issues that divide.

What is fascinating to me is that in spite of all the things about Paul that I struggle with, (many of which we will look at in the coming weeks) one of Paul's most common and transcendent themes is unity in the midst of diversity, forgiveness that trumps the hurt, Love that binds us all together in spite of ourselves.

Ananias is as doubtful about Paul as I was, with good reason. When Jesus appears to him in a vision and sends him to heal Paul, Ananias resists. He names how much evil Paul has done to the followers of Jesus, conjuring up Paul's presence and approval at the stoning of Stephen. After all, Paul was still breathing threats and murder' only a few days before. But God's vision is wider than Ananias's sight, or even Paul's - Paul will be an instrument, chosen by God, for a purpose beyond what either of them could imagine.

Ananias goes to Paul reluctantly, but something changes for him too. Partly his own vision and call by the Lord, but maybe the sight of a man so well-known for violence brought into meekness and vulnerability. Perhaps it is in this moment, when Paul is truly converted. Not when he is blinded or when he sees visions, but when this man Ananias who is his sworn enemy comes to him, heals him, forgives him and re-names him, calling him, "Brother."

This is what Anne Rice is missing, I think. Because being called by Christ means being called into community with those who trouble and confound us, who challenge and convict us. Being called into the Christian community means you are called to be brothers and sisters with those who may not think you should speak in church or who may not agree with what you'd say. It means calling someone 'Brother' in spite of all your feelings in opposition. It means trusting that the Spirit of God is at work among us, in spite of us, through us, and is

bigger than anything we might see or imagine by ourselves. Converting us, binding us together, calling us to be one.

ⁱ Norris, Kathleen *Amazing Grace* RiverHead Books, 1998 pg 37

ⁱⁱ Norris, Kathleen, pg 37

ⁱⁱⁱ A Quote from Anne Lamott