

Conferring not with Flesh and Blood
 Pastor Sam Richards
 June 27, 2021 - Pentecost
 Texts: Galatians 1:16; Acts 26:14

(When God) **was pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him amongst the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.**

“The conversion of Paul is one of the evidences of the truth of our holy religion,” so taught Charles Spurgeon on this text. And it is the truth of our holy religion that “conversion” worked toward the perfection of Paul’s “complete manhood.” Now there’s a rich concept for us to ponder. In what manner are we to take “complete manhood?” Is manhood to be differentiated from personhood, or should we speak of Paul’s full (complete) humanity instead?

Conversion is the pivot point of our text from Galatians 1:16 (When God) **was pleased to reveal His Son to me**). Conversion is also the main point in Paul’s testimony as recorded in Acts—so our theme will be: “the difference conversion makes in forming our humanity.” It is the first step in a long obedience.

I suggest that Paul’s “complete manhood” refers to his humanity—the humanity of a fully-developed individual: someone fulfilled in every aspect (mind, body, soul and spirit) *whether male or female*. And, further, I argue that “conversion” was crucial to Paul’s spiritual/personal development, as referring to his full humanity.

Meeting Jesus humanizes us, but it also fulfills and completes us *and that, in itself, is a most compelling reason to seek the conversion of others*. “All you need is love” morphs into “all you need is Jesus” AND “all you need is Jesus” translates into meaning, purpose and fulfillment—or humanity. At least that appears to be the witness of Paul’s own life—a pathway of self-discovery that, due to divine intervention (conversion) and through various struggles and conflicts, gave us an apostle and a more complete man. Saul was on track to become a Jewish rabbi, God switched the tracks and that mercy made all the difference. It’s about Christ and not our sex chromosomes.

Our *common humanity* that appears to be imperiled in our divided and divisive age, where the current gender wars are being waged. This might not have occurred to me so strongly if a former student hadn’t just asked me to explain how “*Can a woman become Christlike?*” “How can a woman be like Jesus when he is a male and she is a female?” Answer: Of course a woman can become Christlike—indeed, if she is converted, that is precisely the trajectory of her faith walk! The truth of the matter is that a woman cannot become a man like Jesus, **in his maleness** and *why would any woman want to? Likeness to Jesus*

is a spiritual matter, not a gender issue!¹ My first reaction was “How is that even a question? What has gender to do with Christlikeness?!” However, questions like this are being asked and we should have a biblical response.

Biblically, the chief point of the incarnation is that the Son of God took on flesh—as in flesh and blood humanity—not that he took on maleness. And yet it is true that Jesus gave us “gender specific language” to speak of God: referencing God as “Father.” It never occurred to me that “maleness” over filial relationship would have been intended by Jesus. My conviction in this matter was reinforced by the belief that all believers, regardless of gender, both men and women, will come to the place (heaven) where gender is secondary. *We will get past our chromosomes!* Both genders (not all 57 purported genders!) are accepted as **the bride of Christ**, in flesh and blood; which is to say, bodily². Our gendered bodies are as surely regenerated as the rest of our being! When God created Adam and Eve, there is little doubt that human reproduction (**be fruitful and multiply**—Gen. 1:26) was in mind. (My sense is that there is reception in heaven, but not conception; fertility is likely limited to the here and now. Eternal life is supra-biological.)

We should keep this discussion in mind as we explore what is meant by **reveal His Son to me**, and by, **might preach Him amongst the Gentiles**. Our theme is: “the difference conversion makes in character formation, in forming our humanity.”

What is clear is that Paul was moved to preach Jesus as the Christ, as the Lord and as the Son of God due to the revelation he received **from heaven**: the crucified, risen and living Lord spoke directly to him within months of his resurrection. And this enormously talented potential Jewish rabbi was turned on a dime—he abandoned a professional, religious career as a rabbi to become the companion of a group of impoverished fishermen (yes, despite the bonanza catch reported at the end of their fishing career (John 21:17), 153 large fish suggests a large revenue—no monetary value has been determined).

Paul, as Saul, was clear-headed, thoughtful, logical —and passionately loyal to his faith—but his character was flawed in that he was a persecutor and oppressor and murderer of Christians. He was falling apart, degrading by the week, driven by hatred, suspicions and fear! Murder, at least, is a character flaw! THEN something occurred that changed everything about him, and not just his

¹For that matter a man cannot become a man like Jesus because Christlikeness is not restricted to the gender identity of his maleness!

² To be consistent, those troubled by the *maleness* of God, as Father or as Son, should also be alarmed at the *femaleness* of this bridal terminology. It is true both are similes, a metaphorical usage, and should be employed as *bridges to some greater significance*, or truth. When we address God as our Father we are addressing a personal, affectionate and intimate being, a Spirit, who knows us having created us and who cares for our needs as “his” children throughout time and across all cultures, even all divisions in cultures, in this world and the next.

name which changed to Paul. Jesus intervened and reduced him *from his planned self-destruction . . .* and his impaired manhood! From his own descriptions, Paul was little better than a wild beast! He violently savaged the church and believed that he was serving God in so doing.

That event was the proof of the power of the resurrection, was the attestation of the truth of Jesus' claims about who he indeed was, and what he came to do, and, finally what he accomplished in that work.

"The Holy Spirit calls us to faith in Christ." Paul preached "**repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ**" (Acts 20:21) "so as to obtain forgiveness and eternal life." Here's where Acts 26:14-18 comes in:

14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the [Jewish Aramaic] Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? [a spiked stick, a cattle prod] It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' **15 And I said, 'Who are You, Lord? 'And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But get up and stand on your feet; for this *purpose* I have appeared to you, to appoint you as a servant and a witness not only to the things in which you have seen Me, but also to the things in which I will appear to you, 17 rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, 18 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the [dominion] power of Satan to God, that they may receive *forgiveness of sins* and *an inheritance* among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'**

It is quite astonishing what falls out of this passage when you attend to the details. I would point out that Paul, by asserting, **when we had all fallen to the ground** removes the Damascus Road experience from the purely subjective realm—it was not something occurring psychologically to him! This accords with **The men traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one** which underscores the collective nature of the encounter that day. History.

Paul adds that he heard, **in the Hebrew dialect**, most likely meaning Jewish Aramaic(!) **what the men with him also heard: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'** (v.14) They must have experienced something shocking, for they were participants with Saul in this persecution—there was a double exposure going on! First, there is the resistance implicit in **kicking against the goads**—were they all conflicted? Perhaps.

Were they all also guilty of denying the truth of who Jesus was, as well as implicated in the "reality" of the oppression—which they were now executing?

Then, there was the fall-out; Saul, the leader of this expedition, **rose from the ground, blinded—his eyes were open, he saw nothing.** (Acts 9:8) **So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.** Note how they dealt with the reality of *the consequences* for Saul of his **persecuting Jesus**. How could they “hear” and engage in all that and not experience some disquietude (some perplexity and self-reflection to say the least) for themselves?! No guilt, shame, doubts?

Here, in Acts 26, the situation as reported in Acts 9 is back-filled somewhat: whereas in Acts 9 we read **Saul rose**, here that is amplified, audibly, as a command: **But get up and stand on your feet.** And Saul obeys that command (his first step in a long obedience).

And, next in sequence, is an explanation to Saul of why he has experienced this confrontation: **for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you as a servant and a witness not only to the things in which you have seen Me, but also to the things in which I will appear to you.** (Acts 26:16b-d) Now, if all of this occurred in the same window of time, Saul’s erstwhile companions would know the purpose behind **the light from heaven**, having heard the accompanying vocal address. There is no indication in the text of when they stopped hearing the voice from heaven!

A servant and a witness, then, parallels the subsequent disclosure to Ananias (*from the Lord, in a vision!* Acts 9:10, 15), **he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings** (where Paul currently is, speaking in Acts 26!) **and the children of Israel.** (Acts 9:15) **For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name** (Acts 9:16) corresponds to **not only to the things in which you have seen Me, but also to the things in which I will appear to you.** (Acts 26:16) Then, in Acts 26:17, Paul notes the **suffering** as revealed to Ananias referenced in **deliverances** from **your people and from the Gentiles**. Despite this rejection and opposition, Paul is **to open their eyes** (as his were opened previously?) **so that they might turn from darkness to light** (as he had done on the Damascus road conversion!) Remember **the light from heaven?**) and **from the power of Satan to God, that they might receive** a. **forgiveness of sins** and b. **an inheritance, a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me** (which is to say, **eternal life**). Quite nuanced and amazing—mutually supporting passages.]

Paul, as an apostle, becomes the exact opposite of who and what he was before! That is the evidence of the truth of our holy religion of which Spurgeon wrote—that is the difference conversion makes! A deformed character (Saul’s) was entirely renovated by the truth of Christ **and the fully developed humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ** was established as a goal post in Paul’s subsequent life!

And all of this begins with Paul's choice, post-conversion, to live a principled life and the principle is this:

Do not consult with flesh and blood when the Lord commissions you to do something. DO IT. This is a word for us!

And what, again, was that command? **Preach Christ among the Gentiles.** We have that in abbreviated form here. Acts 9:15-16 is the expanded version:

15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen [a]instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer in behalf of My name.”

Preach Christ summarizes **to bear My name** and among the Gentiles. That is amplified to read **before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel**—which broadens the target audience considerably—and we learn that he was **a chosen instrument of God (of Mine)** which makes the meaning of *his commission* clearer. And the Lord promises Paul spiritual tutelage in the process: **I will show him how much he must suffer in behalf of My name.**

Paul would be schooled in the school of suffering—as we all must be. As for **reveal(ing) His Son to me**, we have the manner of Paul's acquisition of his gospel: **I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it** (by *any man?*), **but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.** (Gal. 1:12) A direct revelation.

Although Paul was preaching from the start, there is the period of three years³ in the Arabian desert where Paul attended the school of Jesus Christ—very much as he had attended the school of Gamaliel in Jerusalem years prior to his encounter with the Christ! The evidence of this tutelage is found in passages marked by **what I received from the Lord, I also passed on to you.** (See how Gal. 1:12 is supported by Matthew 28:20, I Cor. 11:23 and 15:3 as well as predicated in Deut. 4:5!) We do not possess the syllabus of Paul's course of studies, but the scriptural course description in Luke 24: 25-27 might give us some idea of its scope:

25 And then He said to them, “[a] You foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary for the [b, MESIAH] Christ to suffer these things and to come into His glory?” 27 Then beginning [c, from] with Moses and [d, from] with all

³ Up to ten further years may be considered before Paul appears in Antioch to teach new disciples.

the Prophets, He explained to them the things *written* about Himself in all the Scriptures.

Now the principled life that Paul chose to live is the life of each of us to live.

It has the same strictures of *not consulting with flesh and blood—either that of others, or of your own self!* For the Christian life is one of pleasing Christ and that is often opposed to pleasing self, or any flesh and blood. **If I did that**, says Paul, **I would not be a servant of God.** We are to obey the commands of Christ in all our Christian duties/or commissions,

I close with enumerating five such duties:

1. We are commanded to ***forsake all known sin*** and to always choose to do what is right! Even if “society” deems some activity, or practice as “right,” we must remember that it isn’t “society” which will pass judgment on our ways at the final judgment! And it is not “society” which will reward us according to good that we have done. Forsake sin . . . just do it.

2. We are to live ***consecrated lives*** which means we are to live for Christ alone in all that we are with all that we have. This includes our spirit, minds/souls and bodies all are to be “holy.” The alternative to consecrated living is a diluted, or adulterated obedience.

3. We live to ***serve Jesus*** (his call above salary; above considerations of position, place and respectability; we are to work and seek ease, comfort and/or pleasure). This places service above happiness and prevents the heart from growing proud, or naughty. We are all His servants here.

4. We commit to ***make all needful sacrifices***—we do this for Christ and for His cause. This impacts what we do for business, and how we practice business. Some “trades” are simply not for us because they are ungodly, unholy. Perhaps we avoid Sunday trade, or Sunday sports—acting as if Sundays actually are His days for rest, fellowship and worship. We may lose friendships and be excused from certain circles of influence *but by this we are actually delivered from various temptations and the hazards of keeping bad company*.

5. We commit to ***the open confession*** of our faith; we are His witnesses. That is why conversion leads to baptism and baptism leads to church membership. We don’t plead timidity, or shyness . . . or insecurity, or fear of failure. We know that self may speak in these ways to hinder our public praise/adoration. To yield to such social pressure is to make man our god! And that behavior is diametrically opposed to the character of Christ we are pursuing. Self-denial and self-sacrifice are the hallmarks of our choices—rather than to please ourselves, or even to spare ourselves. We are to suffer to gladly bear

reproach—even to the point of death—if that is what it takes to glorify our Lord and Savior.

The performance of these duties lets the world know what we believe and what we stand for as converted Christians. And these are the very pursuits of the Apostle Paul.

Now if you find you can't give up the world in the pointed ways, certainly do not join the church for that would be injurious to both the world and the church. Preferring Christ means, at the very least that we prefer Him to something, or someone else. Half in and half out Christians are hypocrites and they do not impress anyone except, perhaps, with their lack of principle. . . their character deficiency is out there for all to see.

Those who live a converted, principled life live and die with integrity . . . they die well, without regrets! This is commendable and on the last day, its benefits will be apparent, crystal clear!

You can always discover the principled believers; they are the ones who wish they had given more, suffered more, served more—and exercising each duty as a sacred privilege. It is also the secret of a satisfying and meaningful life. Consulting with others often leads to evasion, to cheapened faith and a lower bar—and that is the kindest way to assess it. One might call it treason against love and treachery against Christ. Regardless those who declare their faithfulness by doing their duties are found to be numbered among those who honor Christ's glory the best!

If I were to boil it down to a simple exhortation, it would run like this: seek faith in Him, loyalty to Him and loving adoration of Him . . . and you will do well.

Amen.