

To make sense of how Paul's conversion affected his actual life, not just his theology, it is important to recall what I said about how it did affect his theology. I repeat the key paragraph from yesterday's post before drawing the further even more far-reaching conclusion.

To be members of God's covenantal people, it is not necessary for gentiles to become Jews. They do not need to be circumcised, observe the Sabbath, keep kosher, or any of the rest. They need to believe in the death and resurrection of the messiah Jesus. This was an earth-shattering realization for Paul. Prior to this, the followers of Jesus - the first Christians - were of course Jews who understood that he was the messiah who had died and been raised from the dead. But they knew this as the act of the Jewish God given to the Jewish people. Certainly gentiles could find this salvation as well. But first they had to be Jewish. Not for Paul. Jew or gentile, it didn't matter. What mattered was faith in Christ.

Once Paul came to realize this he was blinded yet again by a further insight. Throughout the prophets of Scripture can be found predictions that at the end of time God would bring outsiders into the fold of the people of God, as gentiles flock to the good news that comes forth from his chosen ones, the message delivered through his Jewish people. As found in the prophet Isaiah:

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In days to come, the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the world of the LORD from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2-3)

The prophecy of Isaiah was coming true in Paul's own day. Or consider the words of the prophet Zechariah:

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem... In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." (Zechariah 8:22-23)

God had predicted that gentiles would come to the salvation that transpired in Jerusalem. Where had Jesus been killed? Jerusalem. And how was the message to go forth? It would be preached by Jews, or a Jew, to outsiders. Paul may well have thought specifically of a famous passage about God's special servant, spoken by the Lord himself, again in the book of Isaiah:

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6-7)

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6)

Who is this one who was “called in righteousness” to proclaim God’s salvation as a “light to the nations”? Remember how Paul describes his conversion experience in Galatians 1: God “called me through his grace” and “in order that I might preach him among the gentiles” (Galatians 1:15-16). Paul was the one God had called to take his message of salvation afield. Paul’s calling to preach was anticipated in the Jewish Scriptures. Paul himself was the fulfilment of prophecy. He was the one God had chosen to bring salvation to the world, through his proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

A number of scholars over the years have suggested that rather than speaking of Paul’s “conversion” we should instead speak of his “call.” Part of the logic behind that suggestion is that it is misguided to think that Paul left one religion, Judaism, in order to adopt another, Christianity. It is widely acknowledged among Pauline scholars today that that is absolutely right. As Paul’s most recent biographer, Bert Harrill has expressed it, “Paul thus did not change from Judaism to ‘Christianity’ in the sense of a faith apart from the religion of Israel” (p. 26). In other words, Paul did not see himself as switching religions. He came to realize that Christ was the fulfilment of Judaism, of everything that God had planned as revealed within the sacred Jewish scriptures. God had not abandoned the Jews or vacate the Jewish religion; Christ himself had not opposed the Jewish faith or proposed to start something new. Christ stood in absolute continuity with all that went before. But without Christ, the Jewish faith was incomplete and imperfect. Christ was the goal to which that faith had long striven, and now he had arrived. And Paul was his prophet.

Even while granting that Paul saw himself principally as one who was “called,” it may be worthwhile not to jettison to quickly the term “conversion” for what happened to him.

True, in his own eyes he did not stop being a Jew, or think that what he was preaching was something disconnected to Judaism. But he did “turn around” (the literal meaning of “conversion”), making a radical change in his understanding of that religion and, even more obviously, in his understanding of Christ. And so possibly it is best to consider his experience both a call and a conversion.

Whatever we call it, it was a cataclysmic change, breath-taking in its understood self-importance. Paul was commissioned to take this gospel message to the gentiles. That was not merely an interesting career choice. It was the fulfilment of God’s plan for the human race. Paul’s mission had been anticipated by the prophets of old. He himself was to bring the history of the world to a fitting climax.[/private]



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