

Discovered Ministries

WHEN WAS SAUL CONVERTED?
EVALUATING THE CONVERSION OF SAUL IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

A Paper

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INTRODUCTION

After Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost, the most significant event in the New Testament is the conversion of Saul. Saul's conversion is mentioned in multiple New Testament books including Galatians, Philippians, and 2 Corinthians. However his conversion is most significantly emphasized in the book of Acts which contains three detailed accounts in chapters 9, 22, and 26. It is probably unique in that no other event in the Bible is described in detail, three times, and within the same book. It is safe to assume that Luke and the Holy Spirit thought Saul's conversion was a significant event and that we as readers should take notice.

The main question this paper seeks to answer is "When was Saul converted?" We will first defend that Saul did experience a legitimate conversion. After defining conversion, I will be proposing a more nuanced view of Saul's conversion that I believe to be presented in scripture.

EVALUATING THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

Was the Damascus experience a conversion?

In the last fifty years it has become increasingly common for scholars to say Saul's "conversion" was not a conversion at all. Tom Wright popularly argues that "conversion" is not a fitting description for Saul's experience. Wright explains his position saying:

If I say someone was converted today, the normal assumption would be this person has been an atheist or an agnostic or whatever and has "come to faith" (had a spiritual experience). Paul was a deeply spiritual man, deeply prayerful man, who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the Creator God, the God of Israel. Paul never

*stopped worshipping the creator God, the God of Israel, throughout his life. What happened was that he came to realize that this God who he'd always worshipped had acted in and as Jesus and then he quickly came to realize was active in and through his Spirit. So we have to be very careful in case we give the impression that Paul leaves something called "Judaism" and embraces something called "Christianity".*¹

It seems that Wright is opposed to the term "conversion" because that can be confused with our modern experience of someone switching from one completely different worldview to another. He argues this is not the case with Saul because he worshipped the same God throughout his life, although it had to be revealed to him that Jesus was, in fact, that very same God.²

So if Saul's experience in Damascus was not a conversion experience, what was it? K. Stendahl, the main scholar responsible for this view, suggests that this experience is best described as an apostolic "calling" rather than a "conversion".³ In the larger scope of Acts, the conversion of Saul is significant because of his work as an Apostle and missionary to the Gentiles. So it is certainly true that these "conversion" accounts are also accounts of "calling".

Where this view goes wrong is that it sets up a false dichotomy of "calling" versus "conversion". There is no reason the Damascus experience cannot be both. Conversion does not prohibit calling and calling doesn't negate conversion. Both can happen easily in the same event. Saul was called to apostolic ministry in Damascus and I would argue he was also converted.

¹ Wright, Tom. "What happened to Paul on the Road to Damascus? | Tom Wright." *SPCK Publishing* (YouTube Channel) 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhMYF1-5vQ8> (emphasis added).

² Wright, Tom. "NT Wright explains what really happened to St Paul on the road to Damascus." *Unbelievable?* (YouTube Channel) 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idZVUjRqSk4>

³ Everts, J.M. "CONVERSION AND CALL OF PAUL." *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). 156-157.

Conversion entails three main things: (1) a choice (2) to transfer from one community to another (3) and to accept the reality structure of that community.⁴ All of these elements are clearly present in Saul who once persecuted Christ and then became persecuted as an Apostle of Christ. Converts often reinterpret their past through their new worldview⁵ and that is obvious throughout Paul's letters such as in Philippians 3:7 where he speaks of his previous righteousness as a Jew and says, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

While Saul's conversion was certainly not normative, he was converted nonetheless. Saul received his Apostolic calling and converted. I believe much of what Stendahl and Wright are responding to is a myopic and anachronistic view of Saul's conversion which is commonly taught among evangelicals. While I disagree with their conclusion, I agree with much of their critique which I expand on in the next section.

Was Saul "saved" on the road?

When referencing Saul's conversion, many Christians believe Saul was "saved" on the road to Damascus. This view is probably slightly misunderstood with our modern eyes.

I would argue that among evangelicals today, if we ask when someone was "saved" what we are asking is when they had saving faith and were born again (in whichever order). While this is an interesting question, the exact time of Saul's saving faith and regeneration are not provided to us in the text. For Luke, that information was not necessary for the accounts of Saul's conversion. Luke was interested in other things.

⁴ Everts, J.M. "CONVERSION AND CALL OF PAUL." *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). 160-162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 160

Like Wright and Stendahl would argue, Luke is more interested in Saul's apostolic calling than the exact moment of his "salvation" (salvation is defined here as saving faith + regeneration). However, I believe Luke is also concerned with Saul's "conversion" over and above his "salvation". Regeneration is an internal work of the Holy Spirit which is mysterious and unobservable to human senses. However, the resulting change in actions and attitudes from regeneration are observable. While Luke does not specify the moment Saul was regenerated, he describes the events surrounding his conversion in detail.

The question of when Saul was "saved" is not a question we can answer with pinpoint accuracy.⁶ However, we can better understand Saul's conversion as a whole.

When was Saul "converted"?

I will argue that Saul's "conversion" was a process occurring throughout a few days. Some key events include his experience with the risen Christ on the road, the days of blindness, his healing, his baptism, and the fulfillment of his calling.⁷

Today there is much controversy over what a proper *ordo salutis* is concerning salvation so any attempt to fit the key events in Saul's conversion to a modern formulation would probably be received with skepticism. However, it is fascinating that within the conversion account of Saul in Acts 26, the Lord provides to Saul a clear conversion process. Schnabel describes the conversion process according to Acts 26:18 saying:

These three infinitives describe three parts of the process and reality of conversion:

- ***Understanding*** the reality of the darkness and the reality of light that make forgiveness of sin and purification from impurities possible through faith in Jesus

⁶ Picirilli, Robert E. *Paul The Apostle*. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1986). 46.

⁷ The relevant passages are Acts 9:1-22; 22:3-21; and 26:9-23.

- *Change of direction from darkness to light, from Satan to God, from sin to forgiveness, from impurity to sanctification, from denial of Jesus' identity as Israel's Messiah and Savior to faith in Jesus, from alienation to an inheritance among the saints*
- *Reception of the gift of the light of God's revelation, of the presence of God's power, of forgiveness of sins, of a place among the saints, of faith in Jesus.*⁸

While this process was given to describe conversions that would happen as a result of Saul's future ministry, it is also a fitting description of Saul's own conversion. When the Lord appeared to Saul, it brought understanding of the divinity of Jesus Christ to Saul. Saul had a radical shift in direction from persecuting Christ to proclaiming Christ. Saul received forgiveness for his great sins⁹ and an inheritance as a member of Christ's body. I will explain these three parts of Saul's conversion process in more detail.

The first words the Lord spoke to Saul on the road was "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). It would have been clear to Saul that this was the voice of God, but the question would have confused him. Saul asks for clarification in verse 5 saying, "Who are you Lord?" and the Lord responds saying, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Saul left this experience blind and was commanded to go into the city to wait for further instructions. Jesus broke through Saul's darkness of false beliefs and brought Saul to the understanding of who he really was.

As Saul waited in the city, he fasted from eating and drinking for three days.¹⁰ The reality that he had been so wrong about God and had persecuted Christ led to repentance.¹¹ At some

⁸ Schnabel, Echar J. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012). 1012.

⁹ *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* (1 Timothy 1:15).

¹⁰ *And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.* (Acts 9:9).

¹¹ *His refusal to eat or drink (9:9) constitutes a culturally understood form of mourning and repentance, broken only when he is welcomed into Christian fellowship through baptism (9:18-19).* Keener, Craig S. Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012). 1638.

point during those three days, Saul turned from being a persecutor of Christ to a follower of Christ. As is evident from the rest of his life and ministry, even starting immediately after his baptism,¹² he had a drastic change of direction.

After being healed and receiving his sight, the Lord spoke to Saul through Ananias saying,¹³ “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:16). As we know from Acts 9, Saul accepted and was baptized.¹⁴ As Saul was baptized he publicly identified himself with Christ. It must not be overlooked that baptism also marks entrance into the body of Christ. While Saul once persecuted Christ’s body, he was now a part of it. Notice how in Acts 9:18, Saul’s blindness was healed, he was baptized, and only then did he eat. A complete, dry fast of three days is dangerous and would have left Saul quite weak. By modern standards, one might think it would make more sense for Saul to have eaten something after being healed so that he could have more strength to go out and be baptized. However, in that culture, to eat with someone was a meaningful sign of belonging. Previously, Saul would never have dined with Jesus’ disciples because he didn’t belong with them. Only after Saul was baptized would he have truly belonged to the body of Christ. Only after his baptism would it have been appropriate to dine with fellow Christ-followers.¹⁵ Between Saul’s healing and baptism, it is clear that Saul received the gift of salvation and the blessing of being in the body of Christ.

¹² *And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”* (Acts 9:20).

¹³ Everts, J.M. “CONVERSION AND CALL OF PAUL.” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). 159.

¹⁴ *And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized.* (Acts 9:18).

¹⁵ *Yet Paul’s taking food here also signifies something further. Food connotes fellowship in Luke-Acts, including with Gentiles (Acts 11:3); that others eat with Paul indicates their new relationship as siblings in Christ (cf. 9:17).* Keener, Craig S. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 2*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012). 1667.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Saul's conversion is one of the most important events in the New Testament. We must be careful not to look at Saul's conversion too simplistically. Scripture describes his conversion by detailing various events that happened throughout a few days. All the details shared are necessary to have a proper understanding of Saul's conversion experience.

I would encourage every believer to spend time studying Saul's conversion. Careful thinking is necessary since there are some things that need to be harmonized among the three Acts accounts and also among details Paul provides in his epistles. However, since the New Testament provides so much detail, it is worth our time to see the portrait that the scriptures are painting.

While this is an important event to study, it is also highly edifying to study. In Saul's conversion we see God's incredible plan to bring salvation to all peoples. We see the radical grace of Jesus Christ to save the worst of sinners. We enrich our understanding of the man who God used to pen much of the New Testament. And we are reminded of the good news that is worth committing our lives to sharing.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Romans 1:16).

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