

Acts 9:19b–31

The Persecutor Becomes the Persecuted

It does not take long for Saul's conversion to bear fruit: "... immediately he proclaimed [Jesus](#), saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (9:20). His actions demonstrate that Saul has been converted for a mission. Behind the account of Saul's conversion in [Acts 9:1–19a](#) and this account of its immediate consequences is Luke's larger concern to lay the theological groundwork that will justify the gentile mission. The bringing of the gospel to the gentiles was not something which came about through human initiative, Luke argues, but through divine leading. Each step is validated through divinely given signs and visions, including the visions which were given to Saul.

In [Acts 9:19b–31](#) Luke struggles with a more immediate problem. He has argued throughout for the preeminence of the disciples as those who have been witnesses to the resurrection. At the very beginning of Acts, Matthias was chosen to complete the apostolic circle that was broken by the death of Judas ([1:15–26](#)). Where does Saul fit into all this?

Luke depicts two types of disciples (Talbert, *Acts*, pp. 41–43), those Twelve who were with [Jesus](#) throughout his earthly ministry and those who are called later, like Saul. The Twelve represent the tradition of the community, the stories of origins which were lovingly retold and zealously guarded as time went on for the church. Those like Saul, who were not with [Jesus](#) from the first, witness on the basis of their present experience of Christ. As we saw in [Acts 2](#), tradition alone was not enough for the first disciples. They had to wait for the gift of the Spirit, for experience of the presence of the risen Christ, before they could move out in power. Paul, who experienced the presence of the risen Christ, must wait until his experience is validated by the Jerusalem apostles before he can move out with the assurance that his good news is apostolic. He was warned that he must suffer for the name of Christ ([9:16](#)) and that promise is quickly fulfilled as Saul escapes by night from Damascus in a basket (v. 25; cf. [2 Cor. 11:32–33](#)). But even suffering is not validation enough. Barnabas must take Saul before the apostles who listen to his story (after first overcoming their fear of the dreaded enemy) and are informed that Saul, the one who was once busy persecuting the church, is now being persecuted as one who is busy "going in and out in Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the

Lord” (9:28).

In his commentary on this passage, Munck (p. 86) is contemptuous of Luke’s contention that Saul must appear before the apostles to have his conversion validated. “If it was Christ who had called Paul, the verdict of mankind could not have been relevant.” His comment is typical of contemporary arrogance which elevates individualistic, personal, subjective experience over communal, ecclesial, corporate judgments. Luke-Acts knows no split between tradition or experience. Both are necessary for a full and faithful witness to the risen Christ. The Twelve knew the facts of Jesus’ career, yet still needed to experience his present power. Paul had a dramatic experience of Christ’s power, and Paul himself stresses that he is on par with the rest of the disciples and that he came to an independent realization of the truth of Christ (Gal. 1). Yet Luke insists that Paul had to set his experience within the facts of the tradition. Both sets of disciples suffer for the truth, both serve the same Lord; though they come to him by different routes, both need one another to insure both power and fidelity in the contemporary community. Without the experience, the “facts” can be cold and dead. Without the test of tradition, our spiritual experiences can become radically subjective, severed from the community, and flights of mere fancy. Not every good news is *the* good news.

John Wesley advocated the fourfold test of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. Calvin emphasized the twofold call to ministry—God calls but the church must also call. These were later attempts to embody the wisdom portrayed in Luke-Acts of tradition and experience. Paul becomes the preeminent apostle to the gentiles in Acts, but Luke cannot make him the same as the Twelve. The two paths of discipleship belong together. Here is a warning against our contemporary tendency to devalue tradition and thus make truth the sole possession of “the arrogant oligarchy of those who happen to be walking about” (G. K. Chesterton’s words). Someone’s experience, even someone as invigorated as Paul and even an experience as dramatic as his, is subject to the examination and validation of the experience of the community.

The church is not only the validator of personal religious experience but a necessary component for its continuation and growth. In speaking of conversion two sociologists note: “To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. This is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure of the new

reality. In other words, Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he could *remain* Paul only in the context of the Christian community ... This relationship of conversion and community is not a peculiarly Christian phenomenon” (P. Berger and T. Luckmann, p. 158). No matter how wonderful our experience, the experience can continue in us and can transform us only when it is embodied in community.

Finally, [Acts 9:19b–31](#) suggests that conversion and subsequent discipleship often involve suffering. Up front Saul is warned that he must suffer much for the sake of the Christ who calls him ([9:16](#)). Saul’s career soon fulfills the prediction. Not only is he the immediate victim of an attempted murder but he also encounters hostility and threat everywhere he attempts to tell what has happened in Christ. In Lystra, Paul is stoned and left for dead ([14:19](#)). He is beaten and imprisoned in Philippi ([16:19–24](#)) and forced to flee in Thessalonica ([17:5–10](#)). Today, when the good news of Christ is often presented as the best deal a person ever had, the solution to all personal and economic problems, and a good way for self-satisfied people to become even more satisfied, we do well to ponder the rough beginning of Paul’s attempt to live out the good news. Discipleship, it would seem, is not necessarily the end of our problems but is more likely the beginning of problems which we would gladly have avoided if God had left us to our own devices. Before his conversion, Saul had the upper hand in life. He was in control, a persecutor of others. Now, after his encounter by Christ, he is a vessel, an instrument in someone else’s project, one persecuted rather than persecuting. Luke’s Paul may not be too concerned with the historical Paul’s “theology of the cross,” but the Paul in Acts will have ample opportunity to feel solidarity with the crucified One whom he now serves. Once again the community learns in the conversion of Saul that God can use even suffering and persecution as a means of spreading the gospel and building the kingdom. Spreading the gospel by word and deed is, after all, what discipleship is about, rather than self-satisfaction, happiness, and pleasure (see [Reflection: Conversion in Acts](#)).

For now, the church is able to live at peace, knowing that whether it be at peace or at war God is committed to the use of the church for the accomplishment of the kingdom.