

Acts 9:1–19a

An Enemy Becomes a Brother: The Conversion of Saul

Flannery O'Connor once said of Paul, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse" (p. 355). No passage in Acts is more familiar than the account of the conversion of Saul, yet few passages are more subject to misinterpretation (for one thing, the New Testament never says that Paul was on a horse!). Our familiarity with Acts 9:1–9 is part of the problem. The story of the Damascus road experience has passed into the lore of evangelical Christianity to be lovingly retold and reiterated as the paradigmatic instance of conversion to Christianity. When we speak of Paul's Damascus road experience, Luke's account is what we are talking about, not Paul's own sparse comments on the subject. Paul never describes a Damascus road experience. Even limiting ourselves to Luke's account, we may find that the story makes different claims for itself than later-day interpreters have made for it. If we attend to Acts 9:1–9 with care, we may be rewarded with new insights for today's church.

The first thing we should note is Luke's rather curious placement of this story. Why does Luke introduce it here? We must wait until 11:25–26 before Paul's mission begins in earnest. No sooner is Paul introduced here in chapter 9 than Luke drops Paul and takes up a long and equally engaging story of the conversion of a Roman centurion. We may miss Luke's point if we focus too exclusively upon Saul himself, as if this is an ill-placed first chapter in Paul's biography. The story of Saul's conversion fits within a larger context of concern over dramatic conversions. Beginning with Acts 8:4 we have read about the conversion of Samaritans, then an Ethiopian, now the conversion of Saul. With each story the conversions become more dramatic, taking us further from the nucleus of the original community in Jerusalem. Acts 9 constitutes an abrupt insertion into the flow of the narrative about the activities of Philip, but its insertion makes more sense if we see this story as another account of conversion that continues the movement of the gospel unto the ends of the earth.

We met this Saul back in 7:58. Luke calls him "a young man" who watched over the garments of those who stoned Stephen. But he is not just any young man, not just an innocent bystander. He not only approved of Stephen's death (8:1) but also led a violent

persecution of the community. “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (8:2–3). Saul is introduced as a violent, active, resourceful persecutor of the young community . Luke then leaves Saul and his persecution of the church to tell a couple of conversion stories. By doing that, Luke has set the stage for the most dramatic conversion of all—the conversion of the most notorious enemy of the church, a man named Saul .

[Acts 9:1–19](#) is but one of *three* accounts of the conversion of Saul. Only an event of the greatest importance would merit such repetition by an author whose hallmark is brevity and concision. Scholars have wondered about the relationship of the three conversion accounts. Some have speculated that Luke is drawing upon three different earlier sources. Others believe that [Acts 9](#) is the core of the tradition about Paul’s conversion while [Acts 22](#) and [Acts 26](#) are later Lukan constructions, which tell us more about Luke’s theology than about Paul’s conversion. Following our effort to take the text on its own terms, let us lay aside such issues and stick with the story, asking how the three accounts demonstrate Luke’s theological development of various aspects within the original account of the conversion, paying particular attention to where this first conversion account is located within Luke’s unfolding narrative (cf. B. Gaventa, pp. 52–95).

In sticking with the story, we may find it to be a bit disappointing from a modern point of view. An important story it may be, but we are told so little about the protagonist. Luke tells us nothing of Saul’s background, education, or inner motives. Considering subsequent interpretation of this story in which great imagination is expended describing Saul’s alleged inner turmoil, doubts about his faith, his experience of a dark night of the soul, and so forth Luke’s account is stark. About all Luke has told us is that Saul is “enemy number one” for the church.

Interpreters should resist efforts to read feelings and motives into Saul that Luke does not mention and should instead focus upon what Luke tells us. Saul was hard at work “ravaging the church” (8:3). Stephen reminded the mob that their forebears persecuted the prophets (7:51–53) and Saul’s encounter with Jesus puts Saul in that company of persecutors. Stephen calls his enemies murderers; Saul breathes “threats and murder” (9:1). Saul’s murderous activity is in sharp contrast to Stephen’s final words, “Do not hold this sin against them” (7:60). Here is a faith strong enough to forgive even murderous enemies. Just how far this forgiveness extends will be shown in these verses.

The joy of the Ethiopian which concluded the previous story stands in sharp narrative contrast to the portrait of a ravenous man “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples” (9:1). While there is much that Luke does not tell us, Luke leaves no doubt that we are reading *the story of an enemy*.

What happens to the enemies of the church? In answer Luke tells a story in four scenes:

Scene one (9:1–2): Saul takes the initiative in a search and destroy operation against the church. Saul, rather than the high priest, is the persecutor (v. 1). The persecution is not confined to Jerusalem but is taken out toward Damascus. There is no discussion of Saul’s motives or goals. All that we can say about him for sure is that he is an enemy (re-iterated in 26:11).

Scene two (9:3–9): Enroute to Damascus there is an abrupt interruption in Saul’s journey. Thrust into Saul’s program to save Judaism is the question, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” The light, Saul’s falling to the earth, tell us that something quite extraordinary, abrupt, divine is happening here. Compare the double vocative, “Saul, Saul,” with other stories of divine calling and interruption: “Abraham! Abraham!” (Gen. 22:11), “Jacob, Jacob.” (Gen. 46:2), “Moses, Moses!” (Exod. 3:4). The question, “Why do you persecute me?” accentuates the close relationship between the risen Christ and his disciples. To persecute a follower of the Master is to persecute the Master. “... he who rejects you, rejects me” (Luke 10:16). Gaventa (p. 58) notes that nearly every other use in Luke-Acts of the verb “to persecute” occurs with reference to Paul (7:52; 22:4, 7, 8; 26:11, 14, 15). For Luke, Paul is *the* persecutor.

Saul’s response is interesting. He wants to know who the “me” is whom he is persecuting. He fully intends to persecute those whom he regards as enemies of God. Can it be that the faithful persecutor of God’s enemies has become God’s enemy? Saul’s address to the voice contains irony since he calls him “lord” or “sir.” The one whom Saul now calls “my lord” will be his Lord, as the crucial turning point in verse six indicates. The voice moves from accusation to commission, indicating that this story is not simply about conversion but also about vocation, a call. ⚡ Saul will not only become a believer but also a person with a role to play for God. With verse 6, Luke’s portrayal of Saul as the bitter, active enemy of the church comes to a close. A voice, a presence, has encountered this Saul and now nothing about him will be quite the same. As for Saul’s companions,

they “stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one” (v. 7). Is it not interesting that these others can be present and yet not see what Saul sees? They are unmoved by the event which is already changing Saul’s life. Conversion, it would seem, while a result of the objective act of God in a person’s life is also intensely personal, often confusing family, friends, and bystanders, who find it difficult to comprehend what has happened to the recipient of conversion. ✎

The nature of the change is striking: Saul is helpless. He opens his eyes but cannot see. He is led to Damascus by the hand and is unable to eat or drink for three days. The one who was so active going to and fro, seeking letters of introduction, pursuing believers all the way to Damascus has now become passive, helpless, like a little child. Thus will Saul, the enemy, enter the kingdom.

Scene three (9:10–16): The one who once persecuted the disciples is now helped along by one of those disciples, one named Ananias. As is customary in Acts, Ananias learns what he is to do through a vision. Hearing his name called, he responds with the biblical, “Here I am” (cf. [Gen. 22:1](#); [1 Sam. 3:6](#), 8). Ananias raises reasonable objections to the instructions of the vision. He has already heard all that he needs to know about this Saul “from many” concerning the terrible things that he tried to do to “your saints.” Can it really be that you want me to go to this enemy?

The voice does not argue with Ananias. It simply repeats, “Go.” Then comes the bombshell. This Saul is not simply an enemy or persecutor but a “chosen instrument,” more, he is “*my* chosen instrument.” The noun “instrument” is used elsewhere in Luke-Acts with the literal meaning of a container or vessel ([10:11](#), [16](#); [27:17](#); [Luke 8:16](#); [17:31](#)). The calling of Saul is not simply to believe in Christ but to be a particularly chosen instrument of Christ who shall “carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel.” The one who was out to persecute those who “call on the name” (v. [14](#)) is the one who now goes forth to bear the name (vv. [15](#), [16](#)). The call gives us a foreshadowing (although not in the exact order of occurrence) of Paul’s future work. Haenchen notes that verse [16](#) exactly reverses Ananias’s words in verses [13](#) and [14](#) (p. 325). The one who did much evil to the those who call on the name will now suffer “for the sake of my name.”

Scene four (9:17–19a): Ananias does as he is told. He lays on hands and Saul is both healed and receives the Holy Spirit. No longer does Ananias speak about “this man” but

to “Brother Saul.” The despised enemy, the alien, has become a brother. Does Luke intend the phrase “on the road by which you came” (more literally, since the verb is imperfect, “on the road by which you were coming”) to remind us of verse 2 where the “way” refers to the believers? On the way to do in the followers of “the Way,” Saul was turned around and set on the way. “The Way” is probably the earliest self-designation of the followers of Jesus, the earliest term for the church. Nearly every religion sees its converts as pilgrims, wayfarers embarked on a journey toward some new plane of existence. The Chinese *tao*, the Hebrew *halakhah* (rule, regulation, literally: the going) depict the religious life as an eventful path toward truth. Luke is fond of using the image of a journey as a metaphor for what it feels like to be a follower of Christ—a Lord who takes us from where we were to a new place we could not have gone without his call and his leading.

Saul’s transformation is complete as he is baptized and receives food (the Eucharist?). We need not speculate on some sort of detachment of the Spirit by the laying-on-of-hands from baptism. The two are mentioned here together to stress their unity rather than their separation, although the initiatory pattern with which we are more accustomed is baptism followed by laying-on-of-hands. Verses 17–19a are a miracle story, sharing much in common with other miraculous healings in Acts. But unlike those healings, the focus is upon the subject of the healing rather than the healer. Ananias functions in the story as a model for discipleship. Lacking the official status of Peter or Philip, he is enlisted as a messenger of God and a mouthpiece for Saul. He addresses the feared Saul as “Brother,” offering fellowship to Saul in much the same way as the apostles laid hands upon the once-despised Samaritans (8:14–17). The Lord’s disciples are not only the prominent “heroes” of the faith like Peter or Philip but also ordinary folk like Ananias, who walk on stage for a particular mission and then exit as the story moves on. Ministry is a function (a job to do for the Lord) more than a status or a privilege. By the end of this scene faithful Ananias disappears.

Note the condition of Saul at this point. Once helpless and inactive, he now rises, is baptized, and takes food, once again responding to God but this time, according to Luke, responding to the Lord Jesus.

Having witnessed this drama in four scenes, we are ready to draw some interpretive conclusions. First, when we consider all modern attempts to psychologize the story, to

reduce it to an account of Paul's inner turmoil, or the tortured, interior struggle of an individual before salvation, we find little support within verses 1–19. *It is the objectivity of the story rather than its subjectivity which strikes us.* It is not an account of what was going on within this man, Saul, but rather a story about a man who was encountered, quite objectively and externally, by something or someone from without. Something has happened to him; a voice has spoken to him, quite apart from whatever his own inner struggles may or may not have been. Conversion, according to verses 1–19, has to do with someone being approached by God (and God's representatives—Ananias and friends) and being changed in the process of that encounter. ✎

Related to the first conclusion is a second: Conversion, change of the radical kind worked in Saul is something Christ does, not something we do. ✎ All of this has come to Saul as a gift. In his rather sparse comments about his conversion, Paul could speak of this as the period when he chose “to reveal his Son to me” (Gal. 1:16). Admittedly, it is a peculiar gift, since it is a gift which will involve suffering. We might wonder why Christ has picked this zealot as a “chosen instrument.” But such questions, and attendant fanciful speculation, are irrelevant. The choices of God are usually inscrutable, particularly when those choices involve persons who are chosen to do the work of God. Saul joins a long list of reprobates (Jacob), murderers (Moses), and odd characters whom God has chosen as vessels for God's work. “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16).

Which leads to a third, and related, conclusion: This sort of conversion involves a journey from self-confident independence toward child-like dependence. The one who knows so much must become as one who knows nothing, one who must be led by the hand, healed, and instructed by the very ones he once despised ✎ . In this painful, baffling interim we turn and become as a little child. We progress by regression and go forward by falling backward. Such turning and helpless regression, accompanied by blindness, confusion, speechlessness, hunger, and childishness is, for this peculiar faith, the very beginning of wisdom.

The church hears such a story and marvels at the power of God to *transform the enemy into the brother.* Sandwiched between the episodes of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40) and the conversion of Cornelius (10:1–11:18) is a story about how God chose to move toward the gentiles through the one whom the church feared and hated (cf. the interesting parallel in 2 Macc. 3 where God turns around an enemy who set out to perse-

cute God's people). Saul is also called Paul (13:9). In his name Saul-Paul, one a Hebrew name, the other Latin, this former enemy will be a bridge between Jew and gentile.

Like Ananias, contemporary disciples must be ready to be surprised by God's transformation of our enemies into our brothers and sisters, for the church knows not who may be the recipient of the inscrutable choices of God (see *Reflection: Conversion in Luke-Acts*).

Acts is strewn with these accounts of conversion that demonstrate the cultural and social transformation which is worked when the gospel is heard and believed. Hans Mol (pp. 45–53) has delineated steps within the conversion process which illuminate Luke's accounts of conversion. The first stage he calls "*detachment from former patterns of identity*." Luke 3:8 has John the baptist urging the people of Israel to abandon their false securities and adopt a new pattern of life in expectation of coming judgment. In Acts 9:19b–31 we shall see Saul coming into the new community and beginning the process of developing a new pattern of identity. Next, Mol notes *a time of meaninglessness and anomie*. While Paul himself may not have described personal doubt and misery as a prelude to his conversion, Luke definitely describes conversion as involving a period of rootlessness and confusion. Paul wanders about blind; the Ethiopian is confused about what he reads in the Scriptures; Peter has a puzzling vision of a heavenly handkerchief (Acts 10–11). *A dramatic transition from darkness to light, from chaos to meaning*, is Mol's third stage of conversion. Acts 9 depicts a light from heaven and a voice which brought Saul to faith. He is blind and then he sees. Finally, *the faith community supports and accepts the initiate into their life together*. The newly converted Saul is welcomed, baptized, and shares in the table fellowship of the church. Paul says that he was given "the right hand of fellowship" (Gal. 2:9). The enemy is addressed as "Brother Saul." Conversion is not an individualistic attainment or personal possession; conversion moves one into the care and nurture of the body of believers. As we shall see in Acts 10–11 and its account of Peter's vision (and "conversion"), one never becomes so wise or adept at faith that conversion stops or one is immune from divine surprises. Conversion keeps on happening, the turning continues within the community (see *Reflection: Conversion in Luke-Acts*).

Yet none of this should lead us to conclude that every conversion is basically the same. Paul's conversion is a story about a call, a specific call to someone who is chosen

for specific divine mission. *There is no indication that Luke attempted to make Paul's conversion normative for every Christian.* [Acts 9:1–19a](#) is a paradigm for the call of an *apostle*, a concern which will be made more explicit in our examination of [Acts 9:19b–31](#). Different people come to [Jesus](#) along different routes, a truth which is self-evident when we note that this conversion is set within the larger context of a number of other conversions, none of which is the norm for every Christian except as every conversion is the result of an encounter with a gracious and loving God who does not leave us to our own devices, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” ([2 Cor. 4:6](#)).