

St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
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# The Acts of the Apostles

The Ministry of the Gospel in a Messy Church & Conflictive World

Acts 9:1-19

Before we explore the story of Saul's conversion, it is important to sort out the two names of Saul and Paul. It is a common misunderstanding that Saul's name was changed to Paul after his conversion. In other words, it is often taught that Saul was his unbeliever name and Paul was his converted Christian name. Unfortunately, this teaching is incorrect. Saul is his Jewish name, and Paul is his Greek name. Before and after his conversion, Luke refers to Saul as Saul. However, later on, the Scriptures refer to Saul as Paul when he begins to interact with the Gentles who typically were Greek. *(I recently heard of a friend's relative that was called Bonifacio in Italian, but in English, his name was Barney. Ha.)*

Now, concerning Paul's conversion, it is important not to use Paul's conversion as a typical conversion. Yes, Paul's character, relationships, message, and mission were transformed. But this conversion cannot be used

as a model for all conversions. Many conversions are not dramatic like Paul's conversion – and that is o.k. Keep in mind that not everyone has led a life breathing murderous threats towards Christians and then was struck down on the road by Christ. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that Paul did not reject his whole system of beliefs and embrace another. He did not leave Judaism but accepted Christ as the fulfillment of His Judaism. And so, if a person is converted, it is not necessary for the person to automatically assume that his conversion is toward becoming a missionary or pastor.

Perhaps we would do well to consider the word 'conversion.' What is meant by the word? If you ask a variety of Christians, you will receive a variety of answers. For some, conversion is a change in lifestyles. For others, conversion is a change of character. And some see conversion as a shift from vice to virtue. Alas! These are not

conversions, for all these things can be done by pagans. Conversion – properly speaking – is not a change in lifestyle, character, deeds, or attitude but a change in Lordship. It is a change in dominion. When we are snatched from darkness unto light, we are converted. More specifically speaking, conversion happens when the Holy Spirit gives faith – through the Gospel – to despairing sinners. In short, a person is truly converted only when he/she believes that God has graciously forgiven them of their sins via Christ. As mentioned before, we must guard ourselves against seeing conversion as a change of character, mind, lifestyle, and morals because this is something that pagans can even do without Christ.

Do these changes in a person happen, though? Sometimes yes, but they are not conversion itself but fruits of conversion. However, there are other times where dramatic changes do not happen. For example, the grumpy plumber with PTSD from Vietnam may still be just as grumpy due to the wounds of war after conversion as he was before, but after conversion, he has the assurance of Christ bleeding through the cracks of his grumpy-ness and PTSD. The sexually abused woman or the struggling alcoholic may still struggle with shame and an addiction to the bottle after conversion but will have the assurance of Christ outside their struggles to cling to.

And so, it is important to assert that conversion is: 1) not a work of man, 2) not a change in attitude, morals, character, etc. 3) not dependent on a mystical experience, 4) not something that occurs in stages or degrees. But conversion is something that is done to a person – namely repentance via the Law and faith via the Gospel. And so, the starting point and ending point of conversion is Christ! Christ is the one that converts, not us. Furthermore, Christ does not convert us to good works or a changed character or a new lifestyle, but He converts us to Himself. Christ is not a means to another end but is the end. We are not converted from ‘vice’ to virtue but from ‘vice and virtue’ to Christ.



