

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, April 18, 2010  
Rev. John Tapscott

## **"EXPLORING REAL CHRISTIAN FAITH"**

Acts 9:1-20

A minister was questioning a Sunday School class on the meaning of basic Christian concepts, such as "faith," "repentance", "baptism". When the minister asked about conversion, one boy quickly put up his hand "I know what conversion is," he said enthusiastically "it's the extra point that's kicked after a touchdown."

That's not usually what we mean when we talk about conversion in the church. From the Acts of the Apostles we read of the dramatic conversion of Saul the persecutor into Paul the apostle. Acts 9:1,2 "Meanwhile, Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." But here's what happened when Paul finally went into the synagogue at Damascus. Acts 9:20 tells us, "Immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogue, saying, "He is the Son of God!"

Paul's conversion is well-known even among people not that familiar with the Bible. When someone has dramatic change in their life, we often read even in secular literature, "It was like Paul on the Damascus road."

Now no one has ever had a conversion experience quite like Paul's. Of course, some Christians have had a very instant conversion but others can't name the exact date, time or place. Some of us come to faith in a flash, others more gradually, it seems. But how you come to faith is not important. What's important is that you are a Christian believer now. And that's what I want us to explore today - the nature of real Christian faith. And Paul's conversion helps us to do so.

**First of all, Paul's conversion shows us that real Christian faith comes from hearing the story of Jesus.**

Now Paul had faith before his conversion. Paul was a Jew, a Pharisee, and a strong adherent of the law of Israel. He believed in the Lord God of Israel, who had made himself known to the patriarchs, who set the Hebrews free from slavery, who gave the Ten Commandments through Moses, who led the people into the promised land, who loved and disciplined and agonized over his people. So Paul wasn't a person with no faith who suddenly came to faith. He already had faith. But it wasn't yet real Christian faith. He didn't yet believe that Jesus is the Son of God. He thought that was wrong, wrong, wrong and that holding this faith was a blasphemous crime, which not only deserved jail but even death.

But even before his conversion Paul knew well what Christians believed. In Acts chapter 7 we see him present as Stephen was tried by the Council. Stephen gave a passionate sermon showing how God fulfilled his promises to Israel by sending Jesus, the Righteous One. Paul listened as Stephen gazed into heaven and said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." And as they were stoning him, he heard Stephen say, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Paul watched as Stephen knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Yes, Paul's conversion was a powerful work of God, but it didn't come out of thin air. How could Paul have called Jesus Lord if he hadn't already heard Stephen call him Lord? God had already planted Jesus' story in Paul's heart, and after his conversion he believed it - that Jesus is the Son of God.

Now coming to real Christian faith is the work of God's Holy Spirit in us but it starts when we hear Jesus' story, his works, his teachings, his atoning death, his resurrection and ascension, how his coming fulfilled God's ancient promises. John says of his Gospel, "these things are written (the story of Jesus) so that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." In Romans Paul writes, "How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? How are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" In other words, faith comes from hearing Jesus' story.

So we tell Jesus' story - to children, to youth, to adults, in our services, throughout the church year. I preach Jesus and tell his story to strengthen the faith of you who already believe, and so that God may bring alive Christian faith in you who are not yet believers. I preach so that all who hear may believe that "Jesus Christ is the Son of God" and may crown him as Lord of their lives. When I preach Jesus at funeral services, I don't expect a massive wave of conversions that day, but I trust that I am planting seeds which may later sprout into real Christian faith, by God's grace.

Back in 1963 the Supreme Court of the United States heard a case known as Murray Vs. Curlett. The decision in that case resulted in school prayer being outlawed in American schools. The Murray in that case was William J. Murray, whose mother was the notorious atheist, Madalyn Murray O'Hair. William J. Murray had been taught to hate God, Christianity, the church, and the Bible. Well, he read a novel by Taylor Caldwell entitled: *Dear and Glorious Physician*, about Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. At the end of the book, Caldwell tells her readers to read the Gospel of Luke if they want more information. William Murray did, and by the time he finished Luke, he got on his knees and gave his heart to the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Today, he is an evangelist and an advocate of allowing God back into the public schools. Faith, real faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God always comes out of hearing Jesus' story, reading it or watching it on a DVD. If you are a Christian believer, give God thanks for all those who told you the story of Jesus.

### **Secondly, real Christian faith develops in life's crises.**

Now again, please understand that Paul had faith before his conversion. But this crisis on the road turned his faith in a new direction. 'As he was approaching Damascus a bright light from heaven shone around him. He fell to the ground, and he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord? The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do." Those travelling with Saul heard the voice but saw nothing and were speechless. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing, so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.'

This crisis of blindness shook Paul to the core. This once independent man was now completely dependent on others. Perhaps in those three days without sight that he learned that he must depend completely on Jesus for his salvation unto eternal life. Perhaps in those three days he had the insight that his righteousness before God was a matter of completely trusting Christ rather than adhering to works of the law.

Most of us have had surgery of some kind. You feel utter dependency as you are being wheeled into the operating room. You put your life and well-being completely in the hands of another. Perhaps that's what Paul learned through his crisis on the road to Damascus. His eyes were blinded but the eyes of his heart were opened to the reality of Jesus as the Son of God and his Saviour. He learned to see Christ in a new light. Now there would be further development in Paul's thought and theology, but as a result of this crisis, Paul's faith really turned in a new direction.

Nobody wants a crisis in their life. Nobody wants illness or unemployment or family troubles or financial troubles. But troubles still come to us, often unexpectedly. While God sent this crisis directly to Paul, God generally does not send crises directly to us. He doesn't have to. Life brings them without any need for God to send them. But after they've passed we may understand why God allowed them and even thank God for them. For when everything is going well, our faith can remain shallow. But it's in life's crises where our faith gets corrected and refined and grows deep. It is in life's crisis where really learn to reach out to God and depend on him. It's in life's crises where we really come to see who Jesus is and discover our need for his saving grace. How many people, when faced with their reality of their own mortality, and the prospect of eternal separation, have finally turned to Jesus and accepted him as Saviour and Lord, and inherited eternal life. Life's crises provide the rich soil for real growth in our faith. So it was for Paul and so it is for us.

### **Finally this. Real Christian faith is nurtured in the church.**

Luke writes, "Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord called him to go and find Saul in a house on Straight Street. The faithful Ananias was naturally skeptical at first. But God said "go", and Ananias went. He found Saul, laid hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you... has sent me so that you

may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored. He got up and was baptized. He ate and regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, then went to the synagogue to preach Jesus as the Son of God.

“For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus.” Ananias and that little band of faithful Christians were key in nurturing Paul in his new found faith. They accepted and loved their former enemy and gave him food. No doubt they listened to his story of what had happened on the road and they told him about their own faith. They likely studied Scripture together. It was no accident that Paul started his Christian life among them. And Paul always had a high view of the church and its role in the Christian life.

Don’t underestimate the role of the church in nurturing your faith. Perhaps a few Christians can be nurtured in faith and service apart from the church. But not many of us. Of course, there are things wrong with the church, things we disagree with, perhaps even a few disagreeable people. But I have been blessed by so many faithful people in the church that I could never turn away from it. It’s in the church that I heard the story of Jesus and his saving love. It’s where I learned that Jesus died for my sins. It’s where I’ve turned in times of crisis for guidance and strength. It’s where I’ve grown in knowledge and service. It’s where I’ve learned to be a minister of the Gospel.

When the fires of faith burn low in us the church is where we need to be. We can hold on to other believers and be inspired by their faith. And in their presence, our faith and our service can burst into flame again. One man claimed he could be a good Christian apart from the church. His companion went to the roaring fire in the fireplace behind him, took out a live coal and set it on the hearth by itself, where it soon turned cold and grey. Then he put it back into the fire and the coal began to glow red hot again. Christian faith is nurtured in the community of believers.

No, our conversion experience may not be like Paul’s, but he is our brother in the faith. His faith, like ours, was rooted in the story of Jesus, grew deeper in a crisis, and was nurtured in the Christian church. With Paul we share the real Christian faith which proclaims Jesus to the world, saying, “He is the Son of God.”