

What Makes a Church: Conversion or Credentialing?  
Acts 9:1-5, 10-12, 17-19

Dr. J. Howard Olds  
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It's been an eventful week in the Olds' household. Sandy and I flew in from vacation last Tuesday and immediately drove to Lexington, Kentucky to participate in the service of ordination of our son, Wes, who is now a full elder in our denomination. As I recessed from that service a long-time friend of mine asked, "Howard, which was the best, your ordination or the ordination of your son?" Without hesitating, I replied "Need you even ask?" It is a moving and humbling experience to see your son or daughter set apart for ministry. This evening our church will host the ordination service for the Tennessee Annual Conference. Other mothers and fathers will feel what Sandy and I felt last Tuesday.

All this got me to thinking about the Apostle Paul - unquestionably the most influential Christian of the first century. It was Paul who single-handedly established churches in the Greek world. It was Paul who convinced church leaders that Christianity belonged to the Gentiles, as well as the Jews. Paul wrote more than one third of the New Testament. Paul first articulated the meaning of being "*Alive in Christ*," "*Saved by grace*" and "*Justified by faith*." Let's see what we can learn from this first century apostle of Jesus Christ and see if we can find some insight into how we may live our faithful lives ourselves as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

**PAUL WAS A CREDENTIALLED MAN.** He was gifted by birth, by education, and by personality.

**PAUL WAS GIFTED BY BIRTH.** He was born in Tarsus, one of the three great intellectual centers of his time. It was a cosmopolitan city offering Paul a plethora of cultural experiences as a child. His parents raised him in the Jewish faith, even though they lived a long way from Jerusalem. Because of some connection of his well-to-do father with the Roman world, Paul became a Roman citizen, something that saved his life years later.

In a Hank Ketchum cartoon, Dennis the Menace in trouble again laments, "I didn't ask to be born." Of course, Dennis is right. None of us had anything to do with the circumstances of our birth. Heritage was not ours to choose. When it comes to family, we're stuck with what we've got. I greatly admire those who have overcome difficult circumstances to make something of themselves. Some of us have come a long way from humble beginnings. Others of us have been blessed with parents who cared, communities that provided great opportunities, and churches that took seriously their task of communicating the faith from generation to generation. Don't blow your blessing; don't squander your heritage. You have been blessed and the best thing any of us can do with that is

to thank God for it.

**PAUL WAS GIFTED BY EDUCATION.** He trained in rabbinical school under the esteemed teacher Gamaliel. He was fluent in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew. He could hold his own in strong debates with the intellectuals of Athens. He knew how to influence a community. He understood both Jewish and Greek ways of thinking. He knew both oral and written law.

Education isn't everything, but without it, where would any of us be? My father never had a chance to get an education, although he did quite well in his little world of farming. Shortly after I earned my doctorate degree, I went home to visit my parents. After supper, during the conversation of the evening my dad looked up over his paper and said, "Your mother told me you got your doctorate degree." With all the pride of a new graduate, I replied, "I did!" It got quiet for a while. Then my farmer dad spoke up and said, "I always thought those initials after people's names were sort of like a tail on a pig. They are cute to look at, but they don't necessarily make any more hog."

Whether or not education has made me a better "hog," I've known all these years that I needed all the help I could get. So, I've never stopped reading, observing, learning, or pondering the human condition. I thank God for an education.

**PAUL WAS GIFTED WITH PASSION.** He never did anything half-way. When his mission was to seek and destroy Christians, he went all out. Our text is so explicit. Verse 1 of Chapter 9 states, "*Saul was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.*" When he wiped out all the Christians he could find in Jerusalem, he sought authority to take his bounty hunting to Damascus, "*So that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he could take them as prisoners.*"

Paul was the kind of guy you want for you not against you. You want him on your team. One reason I've learned not to be upset with people who are angry with me, is that I know most anger is driven by passion. If I am lucky enough to redirect their passion they will become my most valuable leaders in the church. People who are angry are usually passionate. If you can get the passion directed, what great warriors of the faith they become.

I ask you a question today as I asked myself as I was writing this sermon, "What has happened to your "get up and go?" Has it "gotten up and went" over the years? Are there things you are still willing to die for? Let me put it a better way, are there causes you are willing to live for? Are there still things worth fighting for? Are there wrongs you are still determined to right? Are there needs you are still determined to fill? Let not your passion wane with time. Fight the good fight with all your might. Just make sure it's the right fight.

**PAUL WAS A CONVERTED MAN.** United Methodists believe in a religion of reason, but we also believe in a religion of experience. Let your faith make sense

but never forget that your heart needs to be warmed. Experience without reason is emotionalism, but reason without experience is intellectualism and boredom.

**CONVERSION IS AN ACT OF SURRENDER.** In Acts 9, Verse 6 we read, “Jesus said to Paul, *‘Get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do.’*” I’ve read that verse about twenty times this week trying to catch the power and the image of it. Do you understand what is happening? Can you imagine this scene? Paul, with power and might has been terrorizing Christians and controlling the high priest. Nobody tells Paul what to do. He is a man on a mission with the power to execute it. But Jesus had a better idea. Never mind that He has to strike him with lightning and knock him off his horse to get his attention. The key to the story is that Jesus needed Paul on his side. Paul’s arms were too short to box with God. God gets his attention. Don’t ever underestimate how far God might go to get your attention when he needs to. Upon getting his attention, God says to him, *“Go to the city and you will be told what to do.”* So there, lying on the ground in a stunned state, Paul is motivated to surrender.

*All to Jesus, I surrender, all to him I freely give.* Sometimes I wonder what we mean when we sing that song. Just how much of all am I willing to surrender?

- What about my assets—are they on the altar?
- What about my vocation? Is it up for change?
- What about my place of residence? Is it negotiable?
- What about my life, my dreams, my hopes, my aspirations?

What part of **all** don’t we understand? Or is it our fear of **all** that keeps us from surrendering?

Bob Allred is the pastor of First United Methodist Church in downtown Atlanta. In a sermon on this text he talks about his conversion on a Sunday afternoon at age twenty-one. “There’s been a lot of water go over the dam since then,” writes Bob, “Sermons preached, degrees earned, ordination attained, but that one singular event on a Sunday afternoon has shaped my entire life.”

*All to Jesus, I surrender. All to him I freely give.* What would that mean in your life? Maybe there are other things we need to let go of today. Not the things that make us, but the things that break us.

- The anger, hurt, rage that we take out on others
- The guilt, the doubt, the shame we inflict on ourselves
- The shattered dreams, wounded hearts, broken toys

At the feet of Jesus are we willing to lay them down?

**CONVERSION IS A NEW WAY OF SEEING.** “Ananias laid his hands on Saul and said, *‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’* Immediately something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again” (Verses 17 and 18).

Open our eyes Lord, we need to see. For religion, in essence, is a way of seeing. Conversion is a new set of glasses by which I will see the world and interpret the







