

UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

Acts 9:1-19

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INTRO. TO SCRIPTURE:

Koinonia B Maturing in Christ: Called to Discipleship. 6 week study.

First one, AUnder New Management,@ is drawn from the conversion of Saul (Paul), on the road to Damascus.

READ PASSAGE

First time we see Saul is in the stoning of Stephen. Look at Saul in texts: Acts 7:58-8:1; Acts 8:3; Acts 9:1-2; enemy of the people of the Way

Look at Gamaliel: Acts 22:3-5; Acts 5:33-39. Even though Saul=s mentor Gamaliel urged the people to leave the apostles alone, Saul ignored his advice.

Saul, at this point in his life, is a religious fanatic, every bit as warped in his thinking as is an Osama bin Laden, or an Eric Rudolph. Saul...a young man with fire in his eyes and blood on his hands...with a self-appointed mission to stamp out this illegitimate, upstart religion, like a shark that has tasted blood, Saul bores in for yet another kill.

And then, in an instant, by a flash of light, Saul himself becomes the arrested one...the predator becomes the prey, the hunter becomes the hunted. Through a blinding revelation, Saul of Tarsus becomes a new man, Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ. Through his encounter with the risen Lord, Paul's orientation changes B he is under new management. Rather than persecuting Christ, Paul begins to serve Christ.

This morning I invite you to reflect upon two points, all arising from the new management under which Paul finds himself laboring:

1. Should we consider Saul=s conversion as normative?
2. Are you ever called to be an Ananias?

Should we consider Saul=s conversion on the road to Damascus as normative?

Paul's call to the Christian ministry, his conversion, is so well-known and so popular that it has almost become normative when speaking of conversion experiences. In some religious circles an individual is not considered a true Christian unless he or she can point to some experience similar to that of Paul. Often, unless one is able to point to that specific time of being "*born again*", that is, having a conversion experience, one=s Christianity is considered suspect.

Diogenes Allen of Princeton Seminary writes about conversion: "*Whether a person needs to be 'born again' (converted), has become once again the source of friction among Christians.*" Are you saved? Are you born again? Perhaps you have been asked the question, AWhen is your second birthday?@ Friends, we must remember here that Luke provides this story not as a paradigm for future conversions,

but as one of a series of conversions whereby individuals turn to Christ. Remember, at the end of chapter 8, there is the account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip joins the chariot of the Ethiopian, who was reading from Isaiah, and Philip interprets the scriptures to him in light of Jesus Christ, and the eunuch believes and is baptized. This Ethiopian continues along his journey as a Christian, as one whose orientation has changed, as one who has experienced conversion. And we rejoice in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Immediately following our passage, in chapter 10, we have the account of the conversion of the Roman Centurion Cornelius, a devout man, who through Peter's ministry to him comes to believe that indeed Jesus is the Christ. And we rejoice in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Each of these share in common the fact that life for each individual, Paul, the Ethiopian, and Cornelius, takes a different turn. We rejoice in the work of the Holy Spirit. Given the context of the emergence of an entirely new religion, every single person in those early days who became a Christian experienced a dramatic about-face. At the same time, each of these accounts is different, and we are mistaken if we attempt to make Paul's experience normative...if we attempt to judge the depth of person's Christian devotion on whether he or she has experienced a conversion similar to that of Paul.

Dr. Allen observes: *"People who have had a drastic change in the direction of their lives stress that others must also be born again. Of course, this annoys people who have been faithful church members for years and who do not...put all that much emphasis on a conversion experience."*

How then is this difference in interpretation handled in a way that honors the consciences of well-meaning Christians, and remains faithful to the biblical witness as well?

Dr. Allen helps us: *"The way to avoid this needless friction is to recognize that all Christians agree that the crucial thing is to be devoted to God. Part of the meaning of the word 'conversion' is 'to turn toward.' This re-direction may be very sudden so that a person is very much aware of turning around. But it may be very slow and gradual, so that a person is never particularly aware of any motion or sudden change, just as all of us are moving at thousands of miles an hour on the earth's surface but we do not feel any motion. The main issue, then, is whether one is devoted to God, not whether one turned toward him rapidly or imperceptibly."*

"The person who insists on everyone having a conversion experience is putting the stress on the experience of turning, not on the direction toward which one is pointed. Yet, the crucial thing is direction, not the presence or absence of the experience of turning toward God. Being 'born again' should not be identified with the experience of a rapid turn, but with a commitment to God."

The main issue, then, is whether one is devoted to God B whether one's life is oriented toward God. That, friends, should be the question that is asked: AAre you devoted to God?@ or AUnder whose management do you labor?@

Are you ever called to be an Ananias?

Saul is told by Jesus in his vision to go into Damascus and wait there for further directions. At the same time, God appears to a disciple living in Damascus named Ananias, telling him to go to the home of a man named Judas where he would find Saul. Naturally Ananias is suspicious: AAre you sure, Lord? Is not this the same Saul who has been rounding up followers of the Way and throwing them into prison? Isn't this

the man who has done evil things to your followers?@

Well, of course it is, but the Lord assures Ananias that he has a plan for Saul, and that Ananias is a part of that plan. So Ananias goes to Saul, as God=s agent to complete Saul=s conversion, laying his hands on him, presumably baptizing him, and helping him to interpret the experience he has just gone through.

Are you ever called to be an Ananias B to help someone else along on their journey through life, their journey of faith?

I think I=ve probably told you this story, but shortly after I arrived in Paris as the Associate Pastor at the American Church there, I received a call from the receptionist B I was upstairs in our apartment eating dinner with Teresa and Richard B and Kithsiri said there was someone down in the lobby who desperately wanted to see a pastor, and that Tom, the Sr. Pastor, was not in his apartment, and wondered what I wanted him to tell this gentleman. I told Kith to tell him to wait, and I would come on down after I finished eating.

The elevator opened, I got off at the lobby, and Kithsiri pointed to a gentleman sitting on a chair, so I went over and introduced myself B AHi, I=m Rick Sommers.@

He was an American, and his immediate response was, AOh no, a Southerner.@

I sized him up, he told me his name, and we went into my office, whereupon I asked him, AWhat did you mean out there when you said AOh no, a Southerner?= And he replied, AWell, in my experience, all Southerners are rednecks, and at least one of these three: racist, homophobic, or a bigot. Which are you, or are you all three?

Well, to make a long story short, we talked I bet for over an hour. And this guy had issues B major issues. With his dad, with his mom, with his siblings B with himself. I mean this guy was as screwed up as they come. And I spent time with him, I think I gave him a book or two, encouraged him to get counseling from someone who had some experience dealing with the issues he was facing, and prayed with and for him. And when he got up to leave, if nothing else, I hoped at the least I had caused him to re-think his view on Southerners.

Well, we went about our life in Paris, and I would never have thought about this guy again, except for his comment about Southerners, nor would he remind me of Ananias if not for the fact that about a year later, I got another call from Kithsiri, saying that there was a guy downstairs asking specifically to see me. AHe asked for me by name@ AYes.@ AI don=t know anybody by that name.@ AHe said he met you last year.@

ATell him I=ll be down after I finish dinner.@ An lo and behold, it was this same gentleman, who stopped by simply to thank me for spending time with him. He still had issues, but he looked better, he sounded better, and said he was in the process of trying to deal with some of the issues he knew he needed to face. He had spent some time with his mother in Germany, and was headed back to the States to try to work through some things with the rest of his family.

I don=t know what happened to this guy. I don=t think I would recognize him if he walked in the door, but I do believe that in some small way I gave him some hope B at least for a time B but most importantly, thought I was being faithful to God in seeking to be an Ananias to one created in God=s image.

None of us may ever have a situation wherein we know for sure that our witness has borne fruit, as did Ananias. But each of us, at one time or another, has the opportunity to be an agent of God's grace, to be an Ananias, to another human being.

Paul was working against the kingdom of God, but under new management, he worked for the kingdom of God. As we orient ourselves toward God, as we are devoted to God, so we join Paul in working for the kingdom.

Ananias, at considerable risk to himself, and surely with no small amount of trepidation, chose to work for the kingdom of God. As do we, when we seek to be Ananias in our relationship with others.