

The Conversion of the Church¹

We draw our text today from the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. These chapters narrate the expanding influence of the Gospel as it breaks out of a totally Jewish environment and is on its way to becoming a world-embracing phenomenon. We read today of Ananias, the Christian who received Paul after his Damascus Road experience. I like to say that Ananias did the real "legwork" of Paul's conversion. It was Ananias who found Paul, laid hands upon him so he would recover from blindness, mediated the coming of the Holy Spirit to Paul, baptized him, and fed him. Ananias may have been the one who put Paul up for several nights. We can't be certain who did that. That's what I mean by leg work.

Certainly the hardest thing Ananias did was to come around to being willing to approach Paul in the first place. Let me explain. Paul was dangerous to Christians. He was a Jewish Pharisee convinced that Christians had fatally perverted Judaism and needed to be suppressed even by arrest and stoning if necessary. So, it took no less than a vision from God to convince Ananias that Paul was indeed the person God wanted.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on May 25, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church of LaGrange, GA.

Now, here's a curiosity. All of the conversions in this section of Acts require a vision from God directed to someone in the church in order to go forward. The Apostle, Philip, is directed by an angel to go down to the Jerusalem-Gaza road. It was there that Philip met and converted the famous Ethiopian Eunuch that legend has as the founder of Christianity on the African continent.

Later, in the tenth chapter, the Apostle, Peter, baptizes a Roman army officer—Cornelius. Before Peter travels to visit Cornelius' home, he has to be convinced that God no longer is dividing up the world between clean and unclean. You see, if Peter is going to be a houseguest with a non-Jew, he's going to have to get over his Jewish convictions about where it's okay for a Jew to visit and what is okay to eat.

Peter has to have a conversion before Cornelius can be converted. In fact, the narration in Acts which describes the way God persuades Peter reads like a conversion story. As I think about it it strikes me that the Church needs to be more converted if it will receive Cornelius than does Cornelius, if he will receive the Gospel. The sense I get is that Cornelius is ready to go in becoming a Christian. What needs to happen is

that the Church—represented by Peter—needs to be brought around in order to do its part.

Is there a principle trying to get our attention here? What if the Christian community, the Church, us, First Presbyterian Church, ever must be coming around—which is what conversion means isn't it—ever must be coming around if people are going to be coming around to us?

Frank Laubach may be a name you recognize. Laubach is most famous as a literacy pioneer and inventor of "each-one-teach-one." Laubach was also a Christian missionary to the Muslim Mindamao people in the Philippians. His mission strategy was to teach the Filipino Muslims to read using the Bible as a kind of first reader. He wasn't having much luck either in advancing the gospel or literacy. One day, a dejected Frank Laubach took an all-day prayer retreat. He climbed to the top of a mountain. As he prayed, he felt God chastising him for his inner negativity towards Muslims and their religion. What God was asking of Frank Laubach was for him to use the Koran as the reader and for Laubach to adopt a generous openness to both Islam and Muslims. Some amazing things happened. Laubach was truly touched by some of the ways the Koran opened up his soul.

He also found that his students started reading and showing a real interest in Christ.

What if the message of Jesus was good news not just for Christians, but for Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, New Agers, agnostics, and atheists? What if the Holy Spirit were so powerful when we connect with others, that it's possible for us also to learn something important about God and for others to glimpse at the Good News?

I like John Alexander Mackay's observation that the true life of Christian faith exists precisely at the boundary that separates faith from the outside world. My hunch is that God is ever pushing us to that boundary.

Now, suppose that what I've said so far is pretty much true. What then? Well, if indeed conversions to the gospel happen when Christians first are converted by God to the world, then all outreach begins with prayer. We can ask God: "Who is the person I've overlooked who is precisely the one God is calling? Maybe it's someone you know who seems too cool to be interested in Jesus. Or maybe that person is too tied up in some other preoccupation like politics, or business, or environmental concerns. Maybe it's someone we genuinely don't

like. Couldn't our prayer be: "Who God are you calling me to move towards?"

I also believe what we're talking about today is a reminder that love is the foundation for all our mission and evangelism. How does the great text go? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." The love on God's side comes before the belief on the world's side.

I'm preaching against, in this moment, any approach to reaching out that amounts to showing the flaws in someone's argument or the wrongness of their lives.

Ananias was taken aback when he heard who God had chosen to be probably the greatest convert ever. But God was firm with Ananias. "Just go!" was the command that made all the difference. The surprise is that it's spoken to the church, not the newcomer.