

The Conversion of Saul

(by Bob Pulliam)

The conversion of Saul (the apostle Paul) has a great deal to say to unbeliever and believer alike. His conversion and life speaks volumes regarding the truth of Christ's resurrection, and validity of His church. Consider what Paul's life has to say about the resurrection of Jesus.

The Conversion of Paul...

Paul was a successful man before He became a Christian. His success was due partly to the fact that he was an unbeliever. He thought any Christian to be a blasphemer, and worthy of death (Acts 26:9f). He was so successful that he even described himself as advancing in Judaism "beyond many of my contemporaries" (Gal 1:14). He was thoroughly content with this life of persecuting Christians, having a good conscience in the things he did (Acts 23:1). If the course he was following in Judaism was so prosperous and comforting, why did he change?

There had to have been a motive in Paul's conversion. The person who changes jobs has a motive. People who move from one place to another have motives. Criminals have motives for robbing stores and banks; and for killing people. Motives make the world go around. Motives are reason for what we do... But what was Paul's, if he had such a great position in Judaism`?

...Money?

One of the greatest motives going is money. People covet it, steal it, kill for it, launder it, go to jail for it, and die for it. It would be the perfect motive for the apostle Paul. So where is all of the money that must have changed him over to Christianity? This is the greatest proposed motive in the world, and yet it is one of the least possible in Paul's case.

...Love?

'The love of a good, or bad, woman has caused many a man to change course in life. Just think about Samson for a minute. Could it be that the apostle Paul converted to Christianity for the throes of love? It might make for a great Harlequin Romance novel; but has no basis in truth.

...Power?

It is true that Paul assumed a great amount of power when he became a Christian, simply because he was also an apostle. Could this be the motive for Paul's conversion? Hardly possible. Think for a moment about situations where power is a motive for a person's actions. Is it not true that such individuals covet power that they might use it? When we look at the exercise of Paul's power, we find a man who meekly dispensed the powers of his office only as required for the furtherance of Christ's gospel. Never for his own benefit. If Paul had a lust for power, and that was the reason for his conversion, you can be sure that he would have used it for his own advancement. Paul exercised his power as an apostle only to further the gospel of Jesus Christ!

...Notoriety?

Was Paul after the spotlight of fame? He is now a character known the world over. This is, perhaps the most likely motive at first glance. However, when one considers the position of Paul when he was converted, the possibility fades into obscurity.

When Paul was converted to Christianity, he was already a very noteworthy figure. He was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries. And how could he think that a conversion would bring him fame, when doing so would take him back before square one. He would now be trying to gain positive notoriety among those who knew him to have persecuted them. There would have been no reason to believe that fame would be his by a conversion.

...Madness?

When all else fails, accuse him of being mad, because what he did makes no sense to you. Could Paul have gone mad? He just couldn't take binding and killing Christians anymore! Now one might conclude this, if we did not have so much information from Paul himself. In all of the letters that Paul writes, he gives no evidence of madness. If such were the case, psychologists the world over would be giving us their "well founded" views. And yet we do not have a psychological profile of Paul that would even suggest a madman. Instead we have a man with a well rounded focus testifying of something to which he was a witness (Jesus alive after the crucifixion). One of the greatest denials of madness is the fact that Paul deals with his former life of persecuting Christians with an accurate focus. He never blocked out the former life which some say was the haunting past which changed him.

The Life of Paul...

Evil motives in a change, such as Paul made, would eventually be seen in the life and commitment of the individual. As we look at Paul, we should examine the sincerity that may, or may not, be there. This sincerity (or lack of it) can be witnessed in a willingness to wholeheartedly give of self to the cause undertaken. How does the apostle Paul fare in such an examination?

...Initial Adjustments?

There were adjustments to be made when Paul was first converted. In his case, acceptance was not readily achieved among Christians. The disciples were afraid of him (Acts 9:26). His former colleagues tried to kill him (Acts 9:23t). He was, to some extent, isolated at this time (Gal 1:17), bringing into serious doubt the accusation that Paul craved attention. If Paul had harbored evil motives (for turning to Christianity), the first three years after his conversion would have shaken such loose. Paul would have renounced his new-found faith, and gone back to the Judaism that had been such a success to him.

...Desire to Unify?

Perhaps Paul's motives weren't "evil", just ulterior. Perhaps Paul thought he could unify his nation that seemed to be in the process of extensive fragmentation. Surely he saw the possibilities in a new religion that threatened the unity of his nation! Could it be that Paul converted in an effort to bring the two sides together?

In all such cases, one can find areas of compromise. The individual tries to play mediator between two sides. Paul, however, never gave ground to the Jews (Gal 2:1-5), but remained firm in his proclamation of Christ risen. He did not seek the unification of Jew and Christian. He sought the conversion of Jew to Christ; and yet this was not his mission! The apostle Paul was an apostle to the gentiles. If Paul had been seeking peace among his brethren, he would have remained at Jerusalem. But He did not remain in Jerusalem. He traveled all over the Roman empire, preaching Christ risen to the gentiles. This leaves us without doubt that Paul was not converted for the purpose of bringing together a rent nation.

...Sacrifices?

Here is the point that should cause all to sit up and take notice. A man harboring evil motives in his change will not make meaningful sacrifices. Superficial sacrifices may be found in abundance; but true sacrifices of faith will be lacking. Paul's life abounded with meaningful sacrifice. These sacrifices exhibited his faith and conviction over and over again. A partial list of his sacrifices can be found in II Corinthians 11:23- 28. To have endured the pain and emotional anguish Paul bore would require a sincerity and conviction that harbored no evil motives.

Conclusion...

When we examine the life of the apostle Paul, we find a man whose conversion makes sense, only when it is explained by the truth of God's word. The only reason for a man to endure what Paul endured, and to give up what Paul gave up, is that he truly did see Jesus on the road to Damascus.

He was not deluded. His conscience did not backfire on him for killing Christians. He was called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, by Jesus Himself. With this he was granted the signs (miracles) of an apostle that validated his story of Jesus' resurrection, his own encounter with Jesus, and the truth which God revealed in him. To examine the conversion of Paul with honesty is to conclude that Jesus truly was raised from the dead, and appeared to him.