
On the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, Let's Pause at Conversion

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

Last week, I preached again on the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul (January 25); but I didn't talk so much about Saint Paul. Listeners and readers know that I have talked often about Saint Paul, whom I actually admire; you can investigate the Cathedral website sermon page if you want to know my words about him.

Instead, I pause this year to consider the first word in that feast name, the word, "conversion." It's good to focus on that word, "conversion," which we too often consign to the dust bin of old and worn-out religious words, words that we think may be out of date, and maybe no longer appropriate to emphasize. After all, who believes in "conversion" anymore? Some of us might think that "conversion" is an inappropriate activity in today's "anything goes" world.

But I disagree. I want to re-claim the importance of "conversion." It may be that the lack of conversion is precisely what is wrong with so many of our institutions these days!

The word, "conversion," of course, means to be converted, to change course, to turn around. It is similar to the word "repentance" in the Greek New Testament. The Greek "metanoia," which we translate as "repentance" comes from "meta," meaning "change," and "nous," meaning "mind." "Metanoia," and "repentance" mean to change one's mind.

Saint Paul, and Jesus before him, and John the Baptist before him, all urged people to "repent," to change course, to change their minds! And it's an important, critical activity to spiritual health! It is a good, and natural, and necessary part of our lives!

Yet, so many of us, and so many our leaders, think it is a disgrace to change their minds. It is not a disgrace! Changing our minds is often for the better! Changing our minds means we are open to truth and love and new ways! Even Yahweh was persuaded to change his mind. After the golden calf episode, Yahweh apparently considered destroying the Hebrew people and starting over again; but, after Moses' intercession, Yahweh changed his mind! (You can read about it at Exodus 32:14).

I consider the archenemy of good religion to be fundamentalism. Maybe we think that fundamentalism means a literal interpretation of the Bible. But that is not so. My experience is that fundamentalism is really the inability, or unwillingness, to change one's mind. That is why fundamentalism can be conservative or liberal. It is the unwillingness, or maybe even inability, to change one's mind, even when the evidence of love or truth is overwhelming!

Fundamentalism started with religion, but I believe it can infect almost every human institution. If fundamentalism is the stubborn unwillingness to change one's mind, then, in politics, fundamentalism can become narcissistic and dictatorial; it can become tyranny and totalitarianism. In sports, fundamentalism is a fan's unwillingness to recognize anything good in any team outside one's home team. In relationships, fundamentalism is the insistence of one partner that he or she is always right. Fundamentalism even exists in science (which is stupid, because the entire scientific enterprise is built upon the process of testing and hypothesizing, and then changing one's theories!).

The opposite of fundamentalism is conversion. I seek to recover the goodness and viability of that word, “conversion.” Conversion is a good and necessary practice in healthy human and spiritual life. Most of us learn, in life, to change our minds at certain times. We learn to turn around; that practice has often changed us, for the better.

Of course, conversion should always have a proper direction. I hope that we have learned, and are learning, always, to turn towards love and truth. Being converted means, at its best, to turn again towards love and towards truth.

So, we celebrate feasts like the conversion of St. Paul. But we celebrate, especially, the “conversion” part. It means, not only that Paul converted, but that conversion can be an ordinary part of our lives, too. Conversion, then, is not just a one-time event or occasion. It is a practice, a healthy, spiritual practice. It is what the world needs today, the opposite of fundamentalism. The world needs citizens and leaders who are willing and able to change their minds towards love and truth.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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