
Conversion!

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

Conversion! Last Sunday in church, we heard the story of how Saint Paul, on the road to Damascus, was “converted.” In my [sermon](#), I addressed the possibility that the word “conversion” might be a good word. Here are some excerpts:

Some Christians have grown understandably wary of the term “conversion.” ... “Horrors!” some of us might say! Surely, we do not mean to be touting obnoxious or simplistic conversion practices! Many of us have been trained to think that conversion is for the simple-minded, or at least for the emotional-hearted, not for the tough thinkers that we consider we ourselves are.

The word, “conversion,” however ... is a word worth using. Conversion is a good thing. Maybe we are skeptical because we have seen “converts” who embarrass the Christian faith. They seem rigid and unkind, angry and racist. I certainly admit, sadly, that some Christians have been converted to a rather simplistic, and even violent, definition of what Christianity is. A wrong definition.

But true conversion is something else. True conversion to the Spirit of Christ, is a deeply spiritual and deeply necessary phenomenon. It is a conversion to grace, and a transformation to truth, and those things can cost a lot. And true conversion is always, always, a conversion to the future, not to the past.

Conversion is not conservative; conversion is progressive! True conversion is what drives the engine of world progress. Think, for instance, about the theory of evolution. People had to have their minds changed, they had to be converted, to believe in the scientific theory of evolution. Without people willing to be converted, we would have no honoring of the work of Charles Darwin. Think of astronomy and the sun and the planets. Without conversion, we would have no Copernican theory of planetary motion. In that instance, you may recall, the Christian Church was primary among those who needed to be converted!

Right. I am not speaking of being converted backwards, into some worldview that simply repeats the errors of history. I mean being converted forwards, into the future, into an entirely new way of seeing the world. Many of us today need to be converted to something new! To a vision of true unity, for instance, where there is neither male nor female, neither Gentile nor Jew, neither Muslim nor Christian, neither black nor white. Hey! That’s what Saint Paul saw! (Galatians 3:28)

The tragedy for much of Christianity is our believing that faith is static, stuck in only one context and generation. What a tragedy! Conversion is implicit and necessary in the ongoing life of Christians; once we are converted, the Christian Church has to be converted over and over again. Yes, if we are to model grace to the world, we will model how to be converted – how to change, gracefully, over and over again.

Conversion is a good thing, but it does hurt. When Paul described his experience later in the Book of Acts, he added that Jesus told him, “It hurts you to kick against the goads,” (in Acts 26). Do you know what a “goad” was? It was an instrument that prodded the ox to go forward, to keep on going. It was like a cattle prod.

In the first century, the persecutor Saul was stuck, was facing backwards, trying to retain something that was bound to change – that is, the old way of getting right with God by following stifling laws. The goads of Jesus were trying to get Paul to turn around and go forward!

So it is that the Spirit of God can seem like an annoyance to us. We kick against her impulse. We insist on resistance. We even persecute, as Saul did. We do evil to others, trying to resist the Spirit of God. But that Spirit is a persevering hound. The poet, Francis Thompson, called that Spirit “the hound of heaven.”

The entire sermon can be at the Cathedral website, and in various kiosks around the Cathedral campus. I pray for ongoing conversion!

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.

[Last Sunday's sermon »](#)

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