

Converted

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January 23-24, 2010
Galatians: Free At Last Series
Galatians 1:11-24

Have you ever had the opportunity to read over one of those lists of the Top Ten events that have changed the world? It is pretty challenging to select from all of the events that have ever happened in world history those 10 that have been most influential. Here are some events that appear on most historians Top Ten Lists:

1. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ
2. The life and death of Mohammad
3. The invention of the printing press (which revolutionized communication)
4. The discovery of the Western Hemisphere
5. The invention of gun powder
6. The Black Death (which was estimated to kill about 1/3 of people in Europe during the 14th century.)
7. The Declaration of Independence (which not only freed the 13 colonies from British rule, but also created a ripple effect for a host of nations towards independence.)

But there is one event that rarely appears on lists of Top Ten World Changing Events that I believe ought to appear on every list. And that was:

The conversion of the Apostle Paul

One biblical scholar named Cousar said this:

After the resurrection of Jesus, no single event affected the course of the church's history so much as did the call of Paul. Other individuals were converted; Constantine even baptized an empire. But the change which occurred for Paul caused reverberations, many of which are still resounding in the church today.

In fact, the conversion story of the Apostle Paul is so contrary to anything that we might naturally expect that it has been long-considered one of the great proofs of the truthfulness of Christianity. Here was a man, who was a former persecutor of the Christian church, someone who opposed everything that the early Christians said about Jesus, someone who rejected the Christian interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' death, loathed the notion that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Paul, this fanatical persecutor of the church, became Christianity's chief proponent and missionary, the chief interpreter of the meaning of Christ's coming, the chief defender of his resurrection, and he wrote more books in our New Testament than anyone else.

Don't you love stories of miraculous conversions? You read about someone, who by culture and upbringing and habits, by the entire way of their life would be the absolutely last person in the world you would ever expect to be a follower of Christ and a proponent of the Christian faith. And yet, there they are following Christ.

I don't know if you've heard of Mosab Hassan Yousef. When Mosab Yousef proclaimed himself to be a Christian, he caused a shockwave through the entire Arab world. You see, Yousef is the son of one of the founding leaders of Hamas, whose military wing has instigated dozens of suicide bombings and other attacks against Israel since it was formed back in 1987. Yousef was a former terrorist himself. He was arrested by Israeli Special Forces as being the head of the Hamas Youth Organization and was taken to a detention center. While at the center he was tortured by the Israelis.

He was then sent to Megiddo Prison which is a large prison where other Hamas members were kept. While he was there he saw members of Hamas torturing other members of Hamas. Later, when he was invited to attend a Bible Study through a British missionary, he read the Bible and began exploring Christian faith. He secretly began studying the Bible and he was struck by the teaching of Jesus when he said, "Love your enemies."

The more he read the Bible, the more he was changed. In 2004 after five years of intense study and research, he made the decision which he said was the most difficult of his life to be secretly baptized as a Christian. It took another year and a half after arriving in America for him to make his Christian faith public.

Yousef said in a recent message:

Jesus showed me how to love people who were persecuting me. Jesus taught me unconditional love; and that is the highest teaching I have ever heard.

He, of course, has been threatened multiple times with death. And there is intense pressure on Mosab Yousef's father to disown him. But so far, he has refused to do that. He loves his son, even though he rejects what his son has done in becoming a Christian.

I love stories of conversion. But you know, every conversion, even of the child of a wonderful church-going family, a family that loves God and practices devotions in their home every day, a family who lives out their Christian faith in front of their child, every conversion is a miracle. God has no grandchildren. Nobody inherits salvation from their parents. Each of us has to go directly to God and find salvation for ourselves.

No matter how wonderful your mother or father was, and no matter how devoted they were to Christ, that doesn't make you a follower of Christ. Christ saves every person individually – one person at a time. And each of us, younger daughters and younger sons, who have lived life on the wide side and older sons and older daughters, who were highly responsible – it doesn't matter who we are or what our family background

is, all of us need to be converted to Christ. We are not born converted; family background doesn't make us converted; or does our culture or our church. Conversion comes about as a miracle.

Today we are going to continue in our study of Paul's letter to the Galatians. I mentioned to you that we are going to go through this book verse by verse so that we might savor every phrase in this brief, incredibly precious book. I'm going to look at the conversion of the Apostle Paul today in a message I've simply titled "Converted." Let's pray.

Galatians 1:11-24

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. 12 I did not receive it from any human source, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. 14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. 17 I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. 18 Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. 20 I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. 21 Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. 22 I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. 23 They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." 24 And they praised God because of me.

Let's look at Galatians 1:11-12:

Galatians 1:11-12

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. 12 I did not receive it from any human source, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

In these verses we learn that Paul received his gospel by way of revelation from Christ.

Revelation from Christ

Let me just back up for a moment and underline a point that I made a few weeks ago. We get into silly arguments with other people where one or both of us haven't the slightest basis for our opinions. We just assert things. So we might argue with someone about immigration and we say, "Well, I just think that X is the case." And the other person says, "I totally disagree with you, X couldn't possibly be the case!" Or we

might debate healthcare or the reason for poverty or any of a number of other topics. But most of our arguments turn on the issue of authority.

The appropriate question to ask concerning most arguments is “on what are you basing your beliefs? Why do you believe what you believe?” Essentially, most people haven’t the slightest idea why they believe what they believe about most things. Typically, the thinner the basis for our opinions, the louder we are.

There really are three foundations for people’s beliefs. The first is internal authority. I believe this for no reason other than my own internal feelings. A few weeks ago I quoted a woman, who appeared on a PBS special, claiming that all cancer was the result of undealt with anger and anxiety. She hadn’t a shred of scientific evidence for her assertion. But she said the reason that she believes that all cancer is caused by unresolved anxiety and anger is because of her inner ding. “It just feels right.”

Woody Allen, the Academy Award winning writer and director of dozens of movies, justified his affair with his step-daughter saying, “The heart wants what it wants.” In other words, I don’t have to appeal to any other authority than my own heart. Woody Allen was saying that his heart told him that his sexual relationship with his step-daughter was all right.

If you talk with a Mormon and say, “No archeologist outside of the Mormon community would agree with virtually any of the fundamental historical claims of Mormonism - there is not a shred of historical evidence for the truthfulness of Mormonism,” you will hear back what I have heard on many occasions: “The reason that I know that Mormonism is true is because of a burning in my bosom.” “My inner ding.” “The heart wants what it wants.”

Jimminey Cricket said the same thing to Pinocchio. “Always let your conscience be your guide.” That doesn’t work so well, if you are a serial killer, or Bernie Madoff.

There is a second reason why we believe what we believe. If we are not relying on internal authority, we might be relying on the opinions of someone else – an expert, a person we listen to on the radio, a teacher we respect in school or in church, what our parents think, what book we read. Paul says the source of my gospel is not me – my inner ding, the heart wants what it wants. I have not let my conscience be my guide, or some burning in my bosom. Nor am I simply passing along what some other human being told me or taught me. This is not a second-hand opinion. The source of my gospel is revelation from Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:12

I did not receive it from any human source, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Those really are the only three sources of belief. Either you are your own authority, or other people and what they say are your authority, or Christ and what he says is your authority for what you believe and what you do.

Our own authority

Now, there is something interesting in verses 15-16:

Galatians 1:15-16

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

...where it says here in verse 16:

Galatians 1:16

to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

In the NIV it reads:

Consult with any man.

The old King James Version is more literally accurate here. The old King James Version says:

I didn't confer with flesh and blood.

Now, that little phrase, "I didn't confer with flesh and blood," reminds me, at least, of something that Jesus once said to the Apostle Peter. Jesus was asking his disciples who do people say that he is. They answered that some people say you are John the Baptist; others say that you are Elijah, or one of the prophets. And then Jesus asked Peter in Matthew 16:15:

Matthew 16:15

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

And we read Peter's response in verse 16:

Matthew 16:16

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Listen to what Jesus says in verse 17:

Matthew 16:17

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

The Bible draws a contrast between flesh and blood, human beings, whether ourselves or someone else, as the foundation for what we believe and revelation from God. We read in verse 18:

Matthew 16:18

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it.

Jesus is not building the church on Peter. In fact, that should be obvious to us because a few verses later Jesus called Peter “Satan.” He said, “Get behind me, Satan.” Jesus didn’t build the church on church leaders. And we should not build the church on church leaders. Good people can get it totally wrong. Peter can turn out to be Satan. Rich, the church council, or a denominational meeting where everyone voted on something and the majority came up with a particular view, that is not the foundation for the church. The foundation is the revelation, the message from God, given to the apostles.

Paul says, “I did not invent the gospel. It is not the product of my overheated imagination. I am not asking you to build your life on me the Apostle Paul. And certainly do not build your life, what you believe and what you do on your own feelings and your own heart. Build your life on revelation from God contained in this book called the Bible.”

Revelation

Now, in Galatians 1:12 the Greek preposition here can be read differently than we find in the TNIV In the TNIV it says:

Galatians 1:12

I did not receive it from any human source, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

It is very possible that Paul is telling us that the source of his revelation is Jesus Christ. But another very acceptable translation of verse 12 would read:

...did not receive it from any human source, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation of Christ

In other words, Christ may be the source of the revelation, or he may have been the content of the revelation given to the Apostle Paul. The center of the Christian message is nothing other than Jesus Christ.

Bishop Stephen Neill wrote in his book, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*:

The old saying “Christianity is Christ” is almost exactly true. The historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth is the criterion by which every Christian affirmation has to be judged, and in the light of which it stands or falls.

Christianity is Christ. Sundar Singh was born into an Indian Sikh family. But after his conversion he became an itinerant Christian holy man going throughout India telling people about Christ. And Sundar Singh was once asked by a professor of comparative religions at a Hindu college in India what he had found in Christianity that he had not found in his old religion.

Sundar Singh said, “I have Christ.”

“Yes, I understand that,” the professor said. “But what particular principle or doctrine or philosophy have you found in Christianity that you did not find before?”

Sundar Singh replied, “The particular thing that I have found is Christ.”

You see, the central content of the Christian revelation is not a set of principles, five-steps to improving your marriage, or your sex life. That is not the central content of Christian revelation. Christian revelation is not essentially about little tips to improve your life or my life. It’s not about improving your self image or thinking positively. Christian revelation is not primarily a way of life for us, a self-help guide to tackling our finances, or losing weight, or any of the other thousand things that may be helpful and good. Christian revelation comes from Christ and it is essentially about Christ.

And you know you are hearing a Christian message when it reveals Christ to you and you find yourself growing closer to Christ. That is the standard by which churches ought to be measured. Is the church bringing me and other people closer to Christ? And giving me and other people a clearer view of Christ.

And friends, even disciplines like prayer and Bible study and fasting – they only make sense insofar as they connect you with Christ. Prayer, at least for Christians, is not an end in itself. It is not just designed to calm us down, although it may do that. It is good to be quiet. But prayer is truly meaningful only insofar as it connects you with Jesus Christ. And likewise, Bible study is not an end in itself. It is not so that you can have your head filled with references and know the list of the Old Testament kings in order. The point of Bible study is to give you and me a clearer view of Christ. That’s the point of fasting; that’s the essential point of Christian community. The revelation is from Christ and the revelation is of Christ.

And let’s look at the story of Paul’s conversion beginning with verse 13-14:

Galatians 1:13-14

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. 14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

And you might title these verses:

Religion without Christ

Paul is holding himself up as a model. He is saying, “Here is the way God worked in my life and if he worked in my life, you can be assured he can work in anyone’s life. I am a model, a model sinner, and a model of God’s grace at work.” Paul says this in a very explicit way in 1 Timothy 1:15-16:

1 Timothy 1:15-16

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

“I am an example.” “I am a model” “I am exhibit A.” Paul is saying, “You find it hard to believe for your husband’s conversion, or your child’s conversion, or a co-worker’s conversion? Look at me. If God can save me, God can save anyone.” Paul says in these verses, “Nothing in my life prepared me to be the chief explainer of the true meaning of Christ’s coming into the world. Nothing in my prior way of life prepared me to love Jesus, to worship Jesus, to defend the honor of Jesus, to live for Jesus and to die for Jesus. This is entirely a miracle of God.”

Now, what was Paul’s life like before Christ got hold of him? Paul’s life was not a life of moral degradation. He wasn’t living a wild life like St. Augustine, before Augustine’s conversion. Paul wasn’t sleeping around. We learn in Philippians 3:6-5:

Philippians 3:5-6

circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

...that Paul was a Hebrew born of Hebrews. He is not saying merely that: I am a Jewish person raised by two Jewish parents. That is not what a Hebrew born of Hebrews means. You see, in Paul’s day there were Jews, who had assimilated into the broader culture. They had adopted Greek and Roman ways in their lifestyles, in educating their kids. The majority of Jews in Paul’s day could not understand the Hebrew language sufficiently so as to be taught in Hebrew in the synagogue.

But Paul says: that's not my family background. We weren't Greek speakers in our home and we didn't live a Greek or Roman lifestyle. In my home, I was raised speaking either Hebrew or a language very closely related to Hebrew, Aramaic. Paul's parents sent him away from his home town to be educated in Jerusalem by a famous Jewish rabbi of the day. His name was Rabbi Gamalia. And before Paul was apprehended by Christ, he was a Pharisee. He tells us this in Acts 26:5:

Acts 26:5

They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee.

He separated himself from everything and everyone that could render him impure. He had no interaction with Gentiles. He never touched any food that was not according to the strict regulations not only of the Hebrew Bible, but of the oral tradition handed down by the Pharisees. He was a Pharisee, born from parents who were Pharisees.

Now, Paul in Galatians 1 distinguishes between religion without Christ and a relationship with Christ.

Religion without Christ is marked by persecution

Galatians 1:13

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

Paul regularly refers to himself as a persecutor of the church. And Paul says that persecution of Christians was his way of life in Judaism, not just a one-time act. Hunting down Christians was not a sideline for Paul when he had nothing else to do. And when it says in verse 13:

Galatians 1:13

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

...it literally means "I made havoc of it. I tried to lay waste to the church. I pillaged the Christian church. I tried to annihilate it."

We see persecution as marking religion without Christ in our day. In Malaysia just two weeks ago, 8 churches were attacked following a decision that allowed Christians to use the word "Allah" in their prayers and publications when referring to God. The churches were hit with fire bombs. One church was severely damaged. It was a church of 1700 members in that Muslim nation. The pastor said, "We are praying for our persecutors and we forgive them."

In Egypt there was an attack just last week in which some terrorists sprayed a crowd of churchgoers with gunfire killing six people. The organization International Christian

Concern lists its “Hall of Shame” every year printing up its list of the world’s ten worst persecutors of Christians. Here they are in order:

1. North Korea
2. Iraq
3. Saudi Arabia
4. China
5. Pakistan
6. Eritrea
7. Egypt
8. India
9. Laos
10. Indonesia

And certainly, within the Christian church there have been outbreaks of persecution against faiths. The most notorious, of course, is the Spanish Inquisition back in the 15th and 16th centuries which resulted in the most intense 50-year period in about 2000 people being executed, the vast majority of them being Jews.

Why does religion without Christ result in the persecution of people of other faiths? Why does religion without Christ result in the persecution of people even within our own faith that differ from us? Why does religion without Christ cause people to persecute other people?

Paul hints at the answer in verse 14 when he says:

Galatians 1:14

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Religion without Christ is marked by an ability to excel

You see, religion almost always for the practitioner is imagined as a ladder in which one can climb rungs to get closer to God. And the more committed you are, the more zealous you are, the more rungs you can climb. If you are really a zealot, you can climb to the top of the ladder in religion which leads to the third mark of religion.

Religion without Christ is marked by an ability to compare

Galatians 1:14

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

You see, if you think of your faith as climbing a ladder, then you can compare the rung you are on with the rung that someone else is on. I do more than this other person. I give a higher percentage of my income. I am more faithful in showing up for church. I

read my Bible more faithfully. Religion without Christ is always comparative. By telling us his own biography, Paul is suggesting that his gospel has absolutely nothing to do with religion that enables you to excel, or religion that enables you to compare.

If you are comparing yourself with someone else, if you are lifting yourself above someone else, if you find yourself excelling in what you think of as Christianity, you do not understand the grace of God at all. Here is a picture of the grace of God. You have been taken hostage along with 50 other people. All of you are about to be killed by these terrorists. Suddenly, Special Forces unit breaks in and rescues all of you. Do you say, “Well, you know the reason I was rescued was because I, alone, pray 5 times a day,” or “In my discussion with my fellow hostages, I found out I was the only person with a master’s degree. I had the highest GPA. I was the most devoted. I was the only who didn’t drink alcohol. I was the only one who was a regular church-goer. I was the only one among the whole group who had done any Bible memorization.” If your rescue has anything to do with you, if you are enabled in any way to compare yourself with someone else in terms of your view of your relationship with God, you do not understand grace. You are still living under religion without Christ.

And friend, I believe that so many people have been driven away from church not because they experienced grace from other church goers and rejected it, or they heard the message of God’s grace and wanted nothing to do with it, but rather because they experienced religious moralism without Christ. Jesus once told a story about two sons – a younger son, who wasted his father’s money in wild living, and an older son, who was highly responsible and looked down on his younger brother’s wild ways. And older brother could not rejoice when his younger brother turned his life around.

The danger of religion is that there is a great temptation to become older brother-ish the longer we are in church – to look down on people of other religions, or races, or lifestyles, to experience life as climbing rungs on a ladder, to have little intimacy and joy in prayer with Christ, to be merciless in criticizing others, to be older brother-ish as we gossip about others, to look to other people like we go around sucking on sour pickles all day long.

Are you saying, Rich, that Jesus always takes the side of the younger brother and not the older brother, that he prefers non-religious people without Christ to religious people without Christ – whose side is Jesus on?

In the *Lord of the Rings*, the hobbits ask the ancient Treebeard whose side he is on. And he answers:

I’m not altogether on anybody’s side because nobody is altogether on my side...[but] there are some things, of course, whose side I’m altogether not on.

Jesus would say the same thing. I’m not on the side of either the irreligious, or the religious. There are some things that I’m totally opposed to whether done by religious people or irreligious people.

But if you look at the life of Paul, religion without Christ is a particularly dangerous spiritual condition because you think you are okay with God when you are not. In fact, you are opposing him. Martin Luther said:

Outwardly I kept myself chaste, poor and obedient. I was given to much fasting, watching, praying, saying of Masses, and the like. Yet under the cloak of my outward respectability, I continually mistrusted, doubted, feared, hated, and blasphemed God. Satan loves such saints. They are his darlings, for they destroy their own bodies and souls and miss all of God's blessings.

Well, now let's quickly consider Paul's conversion. We are considering Paul entering a relationship with Christ.

Relationship with Christ

And we immediately see here that beginning a relationship with Christ is marked by a different primary Actor.

Marked by a different primary Actor

In verses 13-14, Paul is the subject of all of the verbs:

Galatians 1:13

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

Galatians 1:14

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Paul's conversion is marked by a change in the primary Actor in his life. In verse 15 the subject is not Paul, the subject is God:

Galatians 1:15

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased

We move from a situation in which the center of life is "I...I...I" to in Christian conversion the center of life "God...God...God." Christian conversion is always marked by Christ displacing you at the center of your life. And we are going to see this later on when we look closely at Galatians 2:20 where we read:

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

You see, Christian conversion is like going to the movies and looking at who gets top billing, and who is the supporting actor. Before we meet Christ, we get top billing. We are the stars in the drama of our lives – and without Christ, our lives are a drama! Everything revolves around our activity, our thoughts, our goals, our plans, and our dreams. Christian conversion moves us to a supporting role to what Christ has done and what Christ is doing. Christ's goals, Christ's plans, Christ's activity gets top billing in the drama of his Kingdom story. We find this idea, that we are displaced at the center of things by God, everywhere in Paul's writing.

So, let me ask you a question: Are you converted? Is this the way you now see life, that the most important activity is not yours, but Christ's? Have you been moved from the center to a mere supporting role?

Let me ask you, mother and fathers: Who is the primary actor in your kids' lives ensuring that they might succeed? You or Christ? Who is the weight on? You or Christ?

Let me ask you, married couples: Who is shouldering the primary responsibility for holding your marriage together? You or Christ? Who is primarily responsible for reaching into your spouse's heart and seeing them come to know God – you or Jesus Christ?

Who shoulders the burden, primarily, for your future? For your financial well-being? For your health? You or Christ? Who is carrying the weight of your job and the problems you have with your coworkers, you or Christ?

Friends, let's be honest and say that the reason why we are so anxious, so worn out, the reason why so many of us are up in the middle of the night worrying is because we are still the primary actor; we still have top billing in the drama of our lives; we have not yet understood or exchanged the I-centered life for the Christ-centered life. We do not understand Christian conversion. We are not adding Jesus like whipped cream on top of our cake. What a relief it is to be pushed to the periphery and to have Jesus Christ, the sovereign God, who is infinitely wise and infinitely powerful taking the central role.

And a relationship with Christ is marked by personal connection with Christ.

Marked by personal connection with Christ

The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 1:15-16:

Galatians 1:15-16

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

The Christian life, at its beginning and in its continuance, is all about a growing connection with Christ. Do you want to know the secret to Christian growth? It is all about learning: How can Jesus Christ become more real to you? How can you deepen your relationship with Christ? It is not a set of principles, a set of steps, or a philosophy. The Christian life is fundamentally a deepening connection with Christ.

John Stott, the great English preacher of the second half of the last century, wrote a book titled *Understanding Christ* in which he said essentially that a Christian's entire life in the Bible is described in terms of the deepening of our relationship with Christ. Here is John Stott's quote:

We are said to live our lives "through" Christ, "on" him, "in" him, "under" him, "for" him, "with" him, "unto" him, and "like" him.

Christian conversion is marked, in other words, by a deepening relationship with Christ like a multifaceted jewel of exquisite beauty. And a relationship with Christ is marked by spiritual reality when you are alone.

Marked by spiritual reality when you are alone

Galatians 1:17

I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

We don't know what Paul did when he went to Arabia. We are not exactly sure even where he went. It is likely south of Damascus in Syria, somewhere in Syria or Jordan. It is possible that he was preaching Christ in that area. That's what we pick up in the book of Acts. But the three years Paul spent in Arabia were certainly a time where he was to a significant degree, alone.

And I believe that the reality of our relationship with Christ is marked primarily by what we are like when we are alone. When the props of the support of other Christians are pulled away, when we are in a city where no one else knows us, when we are in a hotel room by ourselves, when we are alone on a college campus, when we move to a new city – that's where you see the reality of Christ's work in your soul. It is when you are alone that you know whether or not that you are a convert to Christ.

We see people fail this test all the time. Kids who seem to be doing really well in high school fellowship. They go off to college and fall off the table. And even more commonly, kids who are leaders in their Christian fellowships in college, and then college is over and they fall off the table. What's going on? Or someone moves from

Columbus, from our church to another city, and six months later barely attend church. What's going on?

We don't really know the depth of Christ's work while we are being swept along in the warmth of Christian fellowship. We don't know how much is merely environmental, and how much has gotten down into another person's soul. And the person may not know this. But what are you like when the support of other people is pulled away? That is the question.

I remember just a few months after I came to Christ. I had been enjoying the warmth of Christian fellowship. And then I went out to be with my father in California for three months. I was entirely alone. My dad hated my new-found Christian faith and used to attack me for it. I remember the only thing that kept me going those three months and the thing that deepened my Christian faith was every single night after work, I took a five mile walk around this big park in Oakland, California and cried out to God. It was during those walks that I was personally filled with the Holy Spirit as I cried out to God.

What are you like when you are alone?

Finally, a relationship with Christ is marked by radical change.

Marked by radical change

Galatians 1:21-24

Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. 22 I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. 23 They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." 24 And they praised God because of me.

Other people noticed the radical change in Paul's life. Indeed, I tell you that you cannot say that you are converted unless you are changed. All of us weren't persecutors of the church like Paul. All of us don't have stories of being a Hamas terrorist, or being a heroin addict, or spending ten years in degradation and suddenly coming to the light.

But no one can call themselves a Christian without changing. I'm not talking about a feeling. I'm not saying that after coming to Christ, you must be different. You may always have been nice. But other people say, "You know, you are now way more peaceful than you used to be. You aren't nearly as anxious. You seem to have a new confidence regarding your future."

Perhaps you were always moral in the past. But now you are generous with your money. People notice that you have really been reoriented regarding your money.

Maybe you were always a reliable hard worker, but because of your relationship with Christ, you are taking time to care about and show an interest in, and listen to your coworkers. And this change was not just a natural progression of your former way of

life. You really love people more. The change of conversion is not just going farther in the same direction. Just like in Paul's life, so in ours – we need a U-turn.

Years ago, I talked with a young man, who was coming from a Roman Catholic Church. He had his MBA. He began coming to this church with his girlfriend. I asked him after a number of weeks of attending here at the Vineyard, "What are you learning as you are listening to my messages?"

He said, "Well, I feel like I was always on this path. And I feel like I am kind of evolving into becoming a Christian."

I said, "May I say something to you with all affection?"

He said, "Well, okay."

I said, "That is impossible. No one evolves into becoming a Christian. You make a U-turn. You've got to change. Christianity is not just the natural result of where you've always been going. You weren't on the road, just moving towards Christ. You've got to get on a different road. You've got to turn around."

Friend, it is impossible to come to Christ by going the way you've been going your whole life. You need an intervention, an in-breaking, a surprise visit from God. Conversion to Christ always means radical change. Let's pray.

- I. **Revelation from Christ (Galatians 1:11-12)**
 - A. Our own authority
 - B. Tradition
 - C. Revelation

Revelation of Christ

- II. **Religion without Christ (Galatians 1:13-14)**
 - A. Marked by persecution
 - B. Marked by excelling
 - C. Marked by comparisons

- III. **Relationship with Christ (Galatians 1:15-24)**
 - A. Marked by a different primary Actor
 - B. Marked by personal connection with Christ
 - C. Marked by reality when you are alone
 - D. Marked by radical change