THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL ON HIS THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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The information we have about Paul's conversion are from Luke's accounts and Paul's own letters. Paul's own experience of his first encounter with Christ at conversion can be discovered in his letters. Luke also recorded some of Paul's recapitulations in the Acts. It was while he was on his way to Damascus determined to wipe out the Christian community there, that the transforming vision of Christ came to him (Act 9:1ff). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul affirmed that he was once a persecutor of the Church before God called him (Gal. 1:15ff). Luke's picture of the conversion experience in Acts, however, appears to be contradicted by the Apostle's remark in his letter to the Galatians where he stated that he was personally unknown to the Judean Church. Gunther Bornkamm suggests that this implies that Paul was not present at the stoning of Stephen (Gal. 1:22, Acts 8:1). This implication is not necessarily true or contradictory. The fact that Paul was unknown to the Judean Church cannot imply Paul's total absence from Jerusalem at the episode of Stephen's matyrdom. They might not know Paul, but he definitely knew of the Judean Church (Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6).

Furthermore, the report in Acts that Paul went to Damascus with authority from the High Priest to drag Christians in bonds before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem seems anachronistic. This is because under Roman administration Judean's sphere of jurisdiction did not include Damascus. What might be true is that Paul was acting within the framework of the penal powers granted to Synagogues to deal with heretics. He was thus persecuting the Hellenistic Church as a pharisaic missionary to the diaspora. A comparison of the accounts of Paul's conversion in Acts 7:58–9:1, 22, 26, with Paul's claims in his own letters (Gal. 1:11–17) has also revealed startling differences. [1] St. Luke speaks of Paul as persecuting the Jerusalem church, but Paul made only a general reference to this in his letter. A comparison of the three accounts of the conversion in Acts also reveals some differences. The dialogue between Christ and Paul has striking verbal agreement, but its narrative manifests many differences. Only the brief exchanges between Christ and Paul are given in exactly the same words, whereas Paul unequivocally declared in his letters that he saw Christ on the way to Damascus. We cannot say whether Luke believes that Paul saw Jesus, because Luke avoided saying so in his narrations. This has been a riddle for scholars, but whether or not we regard the appearance of Jesus as subjective or objective, it is clear from both accounts of Luke and Paul that Paul's conversion came in consequence of the belief that he had seen Jesus on the Damascus Road. [2] The motive of his persecution of the Church is best

understood in the nature of his former life. Paul was a fervent Pharisee, isolationist, by the standard of the law unreproachable (Gal. 1:4; Phil. 3:6), and had pride in his membership of the elect race (II Cor. 11:22, Rom. 11:1). Before and after conversion, he held Israel as elect of God (Rom. 9:4–5, 11:28) not like the Gentiles and the children of wrath. These are the beliefs in which Paul was schooled. Among the elect he was a member of the elitist group with the most vigorous obedience to the law, a fanatic of the fanatics, more advanced than any of his contemporaries (Acts 22:3, 26:5, 23:6; Gal. 4:1; Phil. 3:6) hence a zealot who could lead the persecution of the Church (I Cor. 12:9, Gal. 1:23, Phil. 3:6, 1 Tim 1:13).

G. Bornkamm has suggested that as a Diaspora Jew and Jewish missionary to the Gentiles, Paul was probably not opposed to Jewish and Jerusalem Christianity which at that time was not very different from Judaism. His zeal was directed against the Christian Church of the Hellenistic Diaspora [3] whose understanding of the law was revolutionary and in conflict with orthodox Jewish view of the law which Paul stood for. He feels that belief in Jesus as the Messiah was not itself a sufficient reason for persecution [4] But Bornkamm cannot be right in this assertion as there can be no doubt that Paul's persecution of the Church was due to his Messianic beliefs. Paul had objected to an impostor, a leader of treason, and a person who died the worst criminal's death, being called the Messiah. His initial reaction to Christianity was similar to that of any Jew in Jerusalem, who saw Jesus Christ as an impostor who could not be the Messiah. To all Jews, including Paul, a crucified Messiah was a stumbling block and contradiction in terms. They expected a Messiah who would appear suddently to end the present age and usher in God's rule. They never expected him to be a peasant, carpenter, homeless vagabond or vagrant, who instead of restoring the Kingdom to Israel was crucified by foreigners. In the Law, a crucified man is an accursed (Deut. 21:23). This is why the Jews including Paul revolted against the Christian propaganda that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul knew what Jews felt about the crucified Messiah, because he too felt the same way. A man condemned by the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial authority in Judaism, was hence condemned by God and allowed to suffer a shameful death on the cross, falling under the sentence of the law, could not be the Messiah (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:10–14; I Cor. 1:17–24). It was not that Paul did not share the Jewish Messianic expectations. These Jewish Messianic expectations were what Paul zealously cherished when he persecuted Christians. P. H. Menoud says Paul's persecution of the Christian Church was precisely because of his Messianic beliefs. Paul was furious at seeing an accursed man being proclaimed Messiah. [5] His conversion was therefore not that of a faithless man finding way to God, but of one zealous for God. G. Bornkamm continued to see Paul after his conversion as an orthodox Pharisee, who for Christ's sake gave up the law as a means to salvation. [6]

Paul's conversion and call and its relevance to his theology have continued to generate much discussion among scholars. How has Paul's conversion affected his religious attitudes? How is it that the great protagonist of the law has now become the greatest preacher of the Cross that ever lived? How are we to account for the conversion influence on his theology of the Cross? How are we to account for the immense and cardinal contributions of St. Paul on the cross event when he

was probably no eye–witness to the event? Many scholars have attempted to propose different solutions to these questions.

J. B. Gager has attempted to analyse the call and conversion of Paul in the light of modern psychology. Like the psychology of any conversion experience, St. Paul's conversion had its antecedent which was his deep ambivalent attitude towards the law and some unconscious processes not now recoverable in Paul. According to Gager, in the process of conversion Paul had the stress experience which interfered with his normal rationality. This stress experience Paul expressed in anger and persecution of the Church. Thus, Christians were part of Paul's emotional commitment experience prior to conversion. The Damascus road experience was foremost a shock, and it caused a tranvaluation or reversal of values. The man had followed the law and rejected Christ, but now he followed Christ. The fundamental system of values and commitment is preserved intact in the conversion. Paul's religious goals are the same before and after conversion, righteousness and justification. The path to the goals had been the law and now it was Christ. Thus Paul who used to be a Diaspora Jewish missionary to Gentiles has now become an apostle of Christ to the same Gentiles. [8]

Deissmann also shared a similar opinion with Gager. He does not see Paul's conversion as any magical transformation. Paul had been psychologically prepared for it. Negatively, his soul hungers for righteousness through law. At conversion he discovers that no one can keep the law. Positively he is prepared for the conversion by his familiarity with genuine traditions about Jesus, and the effect of Jesus on the persons converted whom Paul persecuted. This does not mean that Paul was dissatisfied with his life as a Pharisee otherwise he would not be referring to it with pride (Phil. 3:8, Gal. 1:15ff). He did not break down under the pangs of conscience as some scholars have alleged. The 'I' in Rom. 7:7–25 is not a reference to Paul himself, but to mankind in general under the pangs of sin, flesh, law, and death. It was probably a reference to an insight into the nature of man, in the light of his conversion experience. It was not a recollection of his experience under Judaism. But the conversion put an end to Paul's zeal for the law. He surrendered his righteousness and got a new righteousness from God. [9]

Gunther Bornkamm, however, does not think that Paul's conversion had been prepared long in advance by his religious background as a Pharisee. Neither was it due to frustration and inability to comply with strict demands of the law, because he often referred to his past with pride. He agrees that Paul's conversion was not that of a lost man finding his way to God but of a devout man earnest for the truth which he eventually found through Christ who died on the Cross. His reference to his Jewish past is not with regret or frustration but with pride. After meeting with Christ all that he counted as gain he came to regard as loss (Phil. 3:4; Gal. 3:13ff). After conversion his former active life became passive. Old values changed for new knowledge of Jesus and gain in Christ; he then knew the power of the resurrection and got a share of Christ's sufferings. The experience made Paul discover the core of Christianity – the Cross. What he had earlier rejected, he now accepts. [10]

There can be no doubt that Paul's conversion not only changed his religious

attitude, it also partly formed the basis of his later theology. On the Damascus road he received the revelation that Jesus was the Messiah promised to Israel. Therefore, it is a truly Messianic revelation which led to his conversion. From the very experience itself, Paul heard the voice which said *"ego eimi Iesous"* (Acts 9:5). Paul immediately knew Jesus' identity. There and then Paul addressed as *Kurios*, He, whom he had earlier persecuted. He became convinced that, *Iesous* was the crucified and risen one who had now become the exalted Lord of all mankind. This was the beginning of the change of attitude for Paul in relation to the cross. Jesus' death came to have a soteriological significance for Paul and mankind. The rejected crucified and accursed one has at his conversion become the Messiah, God's annointed one. The Cross which was the centre of attack and persecution became the very centre and inspiration of Paul's religion. He thus saw the burden to reinterpret the shameful death of Jesus as the Christ, as bearing the curse which rested on sinners, and as a death for human redemption. [11]

St. Paul's conversion did three things in his life. First, it impressed on Paul the unity of the divine action for salvation of all men. The Old and the New Testaments are thus complementary. Secondly, it taught Paul the soteriological value of the death and resurrection of Christ. Thirdly, it gave Paul a new vision of salvation history. The vision was the inauguration of his call and the beginning of his apostolic mission. The conversion showed him that Christianity was in line with the Old Testament and that Christ was the fulfilment. It was God's revelation of His Son to Paul. The Apostle felt himself seized by Christ in divine compulsion for his vocation. He was charged with a mission of a personal necessity.

By virtue of the conversion experience, Paul becames a witness of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In Gal. 1:12, Paul referred to the experience as the revelation and glorious manifestation of Christ to him. He now knew Christ and the power of his death and resurrection. The experience was Paul's own passion and Easter (cf I Cor. 15:8, I Cor. 9:1 and II Cor. 4:4–6). In the description of his heavenly vision of the risen Lord in I Cor. 15:8, Paul preferred to use *ophthe* instead of *eidon*. This implies that Paul took his vision as historical and synonymous to seeing Christ in the flesh as experienced by other Apostles. His experience in such manner, was the last of all *eischaton panton* of such post resurrection appearances [12] (I Cor. 15:8).

The conversion experience formed the basis of many aspects of St. Paul's theology of the Cross. It taught him that the crucified and accursed is God's annointed Son. The rejected Cross became significant for Paul's doctrine of salvation. After conversion Paul came to attribute the saving role to Jesus Christ. Christ became the principle of salvation and not the law. Christ and the law are incompatible as ways of salvation. The problem is a soteriological one, whether salvation came by Christ or law [13]. But justification was no longer by law but by the Cross event, because Christ has taken upon Himself the curse of the law to free men from its bondage (Gal. 3:13). The Cross became the criterion for salvation; he now knows that the Messianic age has begun. The death of Jesus on the Cross is the inauguration of the new age. All the religious values of Paul

changed by his conversion experience as the Cross became God's will.

Many elements of Pauline theology have been seen as aftermath intellectual products of his conversion experience. His doctrines are products of his conversion. The doctrine of justification by faith is not only a theological dictation of God's mode of dealing with humanity, but of Paul's own biography. God had called him and saved him on the basis of the earnestness of his faith. R. Bultmann and E. Kasemann assert that the doctrine of justification as the sole centre of Paul's theology issues out of the conversion experience [14]. J. D. Gager explains that the specific nature of Paul's conversion explains why he developed an affinity for the doctrine. [15] His justification has been completed while he (Paul) was yet a sinner and persecutor of the Church (Romans 8:34). The revelation of Christ to Paul was to put an end to Paul's former zeal for the law and has made him to surrender his righteousness from works of the law, so that his life is given a new beginning and a new goal (Gal. 1:12ff, Phil. 3:5ff). The call has given him a gospel to proclaim, the message of justification. By the event of calvary for the Gentiles, Jesus' incarnation and death assume new meaning (Gal. 2:20, 3:1, 13, 6:14, 17) in that God's love is demonstrated, that He did not spare his son but gave him up for mankind (Romans 8:32). In the context of God's personal dealing with him Paul came to see the Cross not only as a saving event, but as God's justifying and reconciling act. This understanding of the message of the Cross is distinctively Pauline [16].

On the road to Damascus Paul received the revelation that Jesus was indeed the Messiah promised to Israel. Paul then saw that it was needful to reinterprete the shameful death of Jesus. In his office as the Christ he bore the curse which rested on sinners; his death was the price for human redemption. He thus underwent at conversion a change of mind in regard to the Messiah. After he had passionately denied that a crucified man could be Messiah he came to learn that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and consequently rethought all his Messianic ideals [17]. Paul's soteriology underwent a transformation after his conversion. He came to see Jesus not only as Messiah but as one on whom the salvation of all men depends. [18] Paul came to accept the scandal of the Cross as a substitute for the law and circumcision as a way of salvation. Righteousness and salvation depend no more on the law and circumcision but on the death of Jesus on the Cross. Paul thus attached redemptive meaning to the sacrifice of the Cross. Paul's motto became "*Sola Christo Sola fide*". It was a soteriology wholly suspended on Christ. Paul's soteriology before his conversion was pharisaic, based on the observance of the law, but after the experience he accepted the soteriology wholly centered on Christ and in the redemptive worth of his death on the Cross.

The question has been asked whether Paul's conversion caused a total break with his former pharisaic doctrines. It is currently being debated whether there can still be found some traces of pharisaic doctrines in Paul's writing. Paul's pharisaism did not leave him completely; evidences abound on this. He still circumcised Timothy after conversion even when it was not longer necessary. [19]

Some other doctrines have been explained as direct products of the conversion experience. Paul's concept of salvation resulting in new creation is due to his redefinition of humanity transformed in which the lower physical nature is

suplanted by a higher and spiritual nature. In the same vein Paul has a tendency to see life from two angles: body/spirit, law/grace, law/spirit, death/life, loss/gain, sin/love to correspond to and in conformity with the change he experienced at his conversion. At the Cross the whole of human history is divided into two phases. The above terms assume new meaning in light of Paul's message of the Cross. [20] Much of Paul's Theology is a universalization of that conversion experience in the light of his acceptance of the Cross as God's plan for man's salvation.

It was after his conversion that he accepted the scandal of the Cross. His Jewish and Hellenistic background came to play in his presentation of the gospel. The Jewish background of Paul accounts for his abundant use of the Old Testament, and his Rabbinic training enabled him to give new meaning to allegorised Old Testament passages resulting in interpretation which reveals a hidden deep sense of the mystery of the message of the Cross otherwise unknown. His Hellenistic background accounts for his interpretations of the Cross in a legal and juridical manner. [21]

The conversion made the message of the Cross assigned to Paul his personal concern. [22] Nevertheless his theology is not merely a theology of conversion experience. It is rooted in the Apostolic Traditions.

Notes

[1]These differences between Luke's account of Paul's conversion (7:58 – 9:1, 22, 26) in comparison with Paul's own accounts in his letters (Gal. 1:11–17; I Cor. 9:1–2, II Cor. 5:16; etc) has been the subject of much debate in recent times. The most glaring difference between Paul and Luke is whether or not Paul saw Jesus during his conversion. But as S. O. Abogunrin rightly pointed out there may be no real contradiction, since Paul did not give detail of what he saw but merely spoke of a light from above. There is agreement between the two in that Paul knew he met Jesus on Damascus road. He could not call "Who are you *Kurie?*" If he did not believe that it was Christ who was talking to him. Paul was probably reserved on giving information about his own religious life (cf II Cor. 12:1–10, I Cor. 14: 18–19). K. Lake opines that Luke had three accounts/traditions at his disposal which are Paul, Jerusalem Church tradition, and Antioch Church tradition. K. Lake was quoted by G. Bornkamm "The Damascus Experience and in *Reconciliation and Hoe* (Essays on New Testament Concept of Atonement and Eschatology) (Eds.) R. J. Banks & Co., the Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1974, pp. 90–103. H. G. Wood suggests that these differences cannot be avoided; the accounts of Acts should be regarded as historical unless we want to rewrite the account which will amount to superogation. H. G. Wood was quoted by P. H. Menoud, in "The Damascus Road Experience and Paul's Doctrine of Justification by Faith in Galatians" in *Reconciliation and Hope, OP. Cit.*, pp. 90–103. Dupont has also cautioned us to remember that Paul was writing to the Galatians long after the events (20 years later) and that this has probably accounted for the differences to that of Acts. (cf Jacques Duponmt "The Conversion of Paul, and its influence on his understanding of Salvation by Faith" in *Apostolic History and the Gospel, OP. Cit.*, pp. 177ff). Whatever our attitude to the historicity of the accounts in Acts, Paul's conversion and theology of the Cross came in consequence of the belief that he had seen Jesus on Damascus Road. See S. O. Abogunrin "The Theology of the Resurrection in the New Testament, with particular reference to Pauline Kerygma and Soteriology" Ibadan, Ph.D Thesis, 1978, pp. 279ff.

[2]P. H. MENOUD: "Revelation and Tradition – The Influence of Paul's Conversion on his Theology" in *Interpretation*, 7, 1973, pp. 131–141.

[3]G. BORNKAMM: *Paul*, Hodder Stoughton, 1971, pp. 15ff.

[4]*ibid.*, p. 16.

[5]P. H. MENOUD, *Op. Cit., p. 131.*

[6]G. BORNKAMM, *Op. Cit., p. 23.*

[7]The question of whether Paul knew Jesus personally in the flesh has been raised by scholars. J. W. Fraser examined Paul's knowledge of Jesus in light of the evidence of II Cor. 5:16. There are two views on this subject. John Weiss, H. Kennedy, C.A. Scott, J. Klausner, and Van Unnik among others held that Paul knew Jesus before His Passion, when He was teaching in Jerusalem. Paul couldn't be identifying Jesus at conversion if he hadn't met Him before. The second

group's view (by Bultmann, C. Findlay, Schoeps etc.) was that Paul did not know Jesus. This view denied Paul's possible acquaintance with Jesus at all, and that the historical Jesus had no importance in Paul's thought. II Cor. 5:16 gives a contrast of Paul's knowledge of Jesus. We do not know whether Paul's reference here is mainly spiritual or earthly, so we do not know if Paul physically knew him. See J. W. Fraser "Paul's knowledge of Jesus in II Cor. 5:6" *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3, April, 1971, pp. 293–313.

[8]J. D. GAGER: "Some Notes on St. Paul's Conversion" *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 27, October, 1981, pp. 697ff.

[9]G. BORNKAMM, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 23–24 and pp. 125ff. He made reference to Deissmann.

[10]ibid., pp. 125ff.

[11]U. Wilkens: "Die Bekehrung des Paulus als religions – geschichtliches Problem" *Zeitschrift fur Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. 56, 1959, pp. 273–293.

[12]Paul made many references in his letters to the resurrection appearance of Christ to him on the Damascus road. On this basis he authenticated his mission and Apostleship. In I Cor. 9:1ff, Paul asked, *ouchi lesoun ton kurion hemon eoraka* (have I not seen our Lord?). In I Cor. 15:8, he said *eskaton de panton ophthe kamoi* (Last of all, he appeared to me). In these two passages, Paul prefered to use *eoraka* and *ophthe* instead of *eidon*. The word *eoraka* is the singular perfect aorist of *idein* or *orao* (to see). Similarly *ophthe* is first aorist passive of *orao*. From these words, Paul does regard his conversion experience and vision of Christ as an ordinary event. Godet says it is neither a reference to a mere earthly seeing of Jesus nor to a simple vision which God granted him. The words can only designate the positive historical fact of the appearing of Jesus to Paul on the way to Damascus. It is not a reference to ordinary vision of Christ (like that of Stephen.). Neither is it a reference to visions which Paul had after conversion (cf II Cor. 12). The conversion experience was regarded and equated by Paul to be as historical as the earthly testimony and experience of other apostles. See F. L. Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians*. Kregel Publications 1977 Edition, pp. 766ff.

[13]U. WICKENS, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 273ff.

[14]J. D. GAGER, *Op. Cit.*, p. 698. He referred to Bultmann and Kasemann.

[15]*ibid.*, pp. 702–703.

[16]G. BORNKAMM: "The Damascus Experience, and Paul's Doctrine of Justification by Faith in Galatians" *Reconciliation and Hope. Essays on New Testament Concept of Atonement and Eschatology (Eds.) R. J. Banks and Company, the Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1974, pp. 90–103.*

P. H. MENOUD: "Revelation and Tradition: The Influence of Paul's Conversion

on his Theology", Interpretation, Vol. 7, 1953, pp. 131–141.

[17]U. WILCKENS, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 273–293.

[18]JACQUES DUPONT: "The Conversion of Paul, and Its Influence on his Understanding of Salvation by Faith", *Apostolic History and the Gospel, Op. Cit.*, pp. 177–194. See also G. BORNKAMM: "The Damascus Road Experience and Paul's Doctrine of Justification by Faith in Galatians", *Reconciliation and Hope, Op. Cit.*, pp. 90–103.

[19]SAMUEL BELKAN contended that despite the ultimate changes that the call and conversion of Paul might bring to his theological outlook, the fact remains that his pharisaic life has continued to influence his theology. He cited Paul's circumcision of Timothy, his observance of Jewish rites in the Jerusalem Temple (Acts: 21:26), his attitude to marriage (I Cor. 7), and his rabbinic style of arguments as evidences of pharisaism in Paul despite his Christian conversion. Belkin made this point in his article "The Problems of Paul's Background" *Journal of Biblical Literature,* Vol. LIV, 1935, pp. 41–60.

[20]J. D. GAGER has submitted that the Conversion of Paul has divided history into two parts for him, hence Paul tended to speak in contrasts of body/spirit, law/grace, death/life, loss/gain, sin/love etc. While the first part points to his former life as zealous Jew, the second part points to his new life as "a man in Christ" (II Cor. 5:17). Gager therefore concluded that much of Paul's theology was a universalization of that conversion experience. See J. D. Gager "Some Notes on St. Paul's conversion" *New Testament Studies,* Vol. 27, October, 1981, pp. 697ff.

[21]J. A. FITZMYER and C. G. MONTEFIORE have contended that it was after the conversion that Paul's double background came to influence and help in shapening Paul's Theology.

JOSEPH A. FITZMYER: "Pauline Theology", *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed.), R. E. Brown and Group, G. Chapman and Company, London, 1967, p. 802. See also C. G. Montefiore, "Judaism and St. Paul", *Journal of Biblical Literature,* Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, December, 1958, pp. 311ff.

Most scholars have tended to be one sided on the influence of Paul's background on his theology. While some held tenaciously to his Jewish background, others see the Hellenistic background as wholly responsible. Others capitalise mainly on his call/conversion as the only basis of his theology. J. A. Fitzmyer and C. G. Montefiore along with many others scholars have maintained a middle and balanced stand. P. C. Umhau Wolf gave a most reasonable conclusion on the matter when he wrote:

"The 'apostle to the Gentiles' has afforded many opportunities for study, research, and debate. Efforts to fit him into a pigeon–hole have obviously failed. Those who have emphasized the statement 'an Hebrew of the Hebrews' (Phil. 3:5) seek to explain his unique personality and his formative Christian theology entirely by the Old Testament and Palestinian Judaism. On the other hand, many (by far the

majority) have emphasized his roots in Tarsus; only a few individuals have managed to take a mediating position concerning the influences affecting Paul's theology. Curiously the non-Christian writers have probably been fairer to the man as a complex human being with manifold roots." See his article "Concerning the Vocabulary of Paul" in *Journal of Biblical Literature. Vol. XVIII, 1948, pp. 331ff.*