

Our Conversion: A Never-Ending Drama

Acts 11:1-18

May 6, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

Mr. Byrd was the town drunk. The first time I met him was the day I found him passed out on the sidewalk in front of our house. He had collapsed with enough force that the back of head was bleeding from where it had made contact with the ground. When the paramedics arrived, they rolled their eyes and sighed audibly. “Not him again,” I heard one of them say under his breath. But despite their obvious frustration, the paramedics were courteous as they helped him to his feet. “Come on, Mr. Byrd,” they said, “we’ll take you home.” Home for him, I later learned, was a squalid trailer on the edge of town.

Later that week I told a fellow church member of my experience. “We have to do something to help him,” I said. I was surprised when my offering of liberal progressive compassion was met with detachment. “Listen, Chris,” she said as she patted me on the arm, “there is nothing we can do for him. He’s been a drunk as long as anyone can remember, and he always will be.” As our conversation unfolded I discovered that her response wasn’t based on a hardness of heart; it was based on a hardness of experience. It turns out that the good people of this town had tried repeatedly to help this poor man, but every attempt had ended in failure. He never showed any sign of change.

Sadly, my friend’s prophecy came true. About a year later someone found Mr. Byrd dead on the porch of an abandoned building, where he had apparently crawled to sleep off his last binge. He died less than 200 yards from the front door of our church.

The tragedy of a person dying captive to a demonic power so close to a place where Jesus is preached week after week highlights a sad truth. In this world, the gospel will not meet with complete success. Not every addict will come clean. Not every criminal will be rehabilitated. Not every deadbeat dad will be reformed. Not every disordered mind will see the clear light of sanity. Not every angry bitter person will find her heart strangely warmed. And not every unbeliever will be convinced enough of the truth of Jesus Christ to repent of his sin and turn and be saved. In this world, not everyone will be changed.

But the amazing thing is that in the Bible, that fact is not what drives the story. The scandal of the gospel is not that some will not be changed. The real scandal is that some will. In the pages of Scripture we are met with story after story of how, despite all the odds stacked

Our Conversion: A Never-Ending Drama

Acts 11:1-18

May 6, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

against it, the good news of Jesus Christ goes out into the world and changes people. This new movement called “The Way” doesn’t appear to have a lot going for it; no formally educated leaders, no established institutions, no meeting houses, no constitutionally protections, not even much money – just a rag tag gang of fishermen and disreputable women. And yet, when these folks go out and tell what happened in and through Jesus, things happen. Pagans become believers, murderers become apostles, deranged persons are put back in their right mind, the sick are healed, Greeks and Jews sit down at the same table to share fellowship, and city leaders everywhere get nervous. A new power has been set loose in the world, leaving a trail of transformed lives everywhere it goes.

That’s what the book of Acts is all about, especially the first few chapters. Acts picks up the story of Jesus after the resurrection, showing us that things are just getting started good with His ascension into heaven. Though it doesn’t know it yet, the world is about to be turned on its ear.

Now, it’s no fairy tale on these pages. In writing Acts, Luke doesn’t try to give us some cleaned-up story of all glory with no guts. As the news of Jesus spreads, there is failure, rejection, and angry opposition. The very first thing the disciples have to do after Jesus goes back into heaven is find a replacement for Judas, who had betrayed Jesus and then hanged himself – not a very positive note for the church to start on. Then, not long after that, Peter and John are thrown into prison for preaching. A couple of chapters later they are imprisoned again and threatened with execution. Then Stephen is stoned to death as the first martyr for the faith. Clearly, not everyone is excited about the news of Jesus. Not everyone accepts the invitation he offers.

But the remarkable thing is that some do. Some lives are changed. Our story from Acts 11 this morning is actually the conclusion to a longer story, which itself comes as the tail end of a series of stories about conversion – stories of people who turn in faith to Jesus Christ and are changed because of it.

The first conversion story happens at Pentecost in chapter 2. There the followers of Jesus are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin preaching, each of them in a different language. The

Our Conversion: A Never-Ending Drama

Acts 11:1-18

May 6, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

international crowd gathered in the streets that day to celebrate this Jewish festival hears the story of Jesus being proclaimed, each person in his own native tongue. As one who preaches for a living I'll confess that I sometimes wonder whether preaching actually has the power to change lives, but according to the Bible it does, for Luke tells us that 3000 people came to believe that day and were baptized.

Then we jump over to Acts 8, where we find Philip on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, where he comes across an Ethiopian eunuch. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Philip runs up to the man's chariot and begins telling him about Jesus Christ. And lo and behold, this African official comes to believe, and Philip baptizes him right there on the spot.

Next is one of the most dramatic stories of conversion in all of Scripture – the story of Saul who becomes Paul. You've heard this story before, how Saul, who was on his way to Damascus to seek out and persecute Christians, was blinded by a light from heaven and called by God's voice into Christian service. Paul was baptized and immediately began preaching in the very name he had just days before tried to stamp out.

Then, finally there is our story, the story of the conversion of Cornelius. We learn in Acts 10 that Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army, the very army that was occupying Israel. And yet, through a series of visions and messengers, Peter is sent for to proclaim the story of Jesus. And when he does, Cornelius and all those gathered with him come to believe and are baptized.

It's all quite dramatic. The Holy Spirit is breaking things loose here. Old barriers are being knocked down; enemies are becoming allies, the gospel is jumping to new continents; and strangers are becoming church to each other. And all this before Paul ever sets out on his first missionary journey.

But as dramatically obvious as all these conversions are, I would argue that there is another conversion being reported on these pages. What would you think if I told you that the real story in Acts 10-11 is less about the conversion of Cornelius and more about the conversion of Peter? That may sound odd given that Peter is already a believer. Before the book of Acts ever begins Peter has already been designated by Christ as the rock upon which the church will

Our Conversion: A Never-Ending Drama

Acts 11:1-18

May 6, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

be built. All true, but Peter is being converted here, nonetheless. You see, conversion is about change. It is about turning away from what we used to be and towards what Jesus wants us to become. And Peter is being changed in this story, perhaps more than anyone.

That comes through clearly in the longer version of the story before us. When Cornelius, the officer in the pagan army, heard the good news of Jesus Christ, he received the Holy Spirit and came to believe without hesitation. Luke records his conversion almost without comment, as though we shouldn't be surprised at all by the outcome. But when Peter, the faithful of apostle of Jesus, is prepared for his encounter with Cornelius by means of a vision from God, he hems and haws and questions. That's because even though Peter is a believer, his mind is still captivated by his old way of thinking. Peter still saw the world in terms of Jew and Gentile, them and us, clean and unclean, those who are in and those who are out. Peter still didn't get it that Jesus had erased that old distinction. Peter simply could not comprehend that the gospel of grace was so inclusive as to include Gentiles as well.

Until he went and preached to one of them. God used this meeting between the faithful apostle and the pagan army officer not simply to change the pagan army officer, but to change the faithful apostle. God still had something to show Peter. Though Peter had come to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, Peter still did not fully comprehend the implications of that faith for his life. He still did not grasp the fullness of God's grace. There was more transformation still to come, and so Peter's trip to Caesarea converted Peter as much it converted anyone.

The scandal of the gospel is not that it won't convert everyone, but that it will convert some – even some who already believe. Our conversion away from sin and towards Jesus is a change that never ends. It doesn't matter how long we've been Christians, there is still something about our old way of thinking that we bring with us to the faith. The old distinctions we made between people, the old priorities we had about what is important, the old justifications we used to rationalize our behavior, the old assumptions we had about what is possible – something about that has survived our initial conversion. If it did for Peter who lived and worked with Jesus for three years and who saw him in the flesh after the resurrection, then you can rest assured that it has for us. There is more transformation still to come.

Our Conversion: A Never-Ending Drama

Acts 11:1-18

May 6, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

Don't misunderstand what I am saying. Our salvation has been secured by what Jesus did on the cross, and nothing we do will ever make us more worthy of eternal life. *That* is a gift, pure and simple. But there is still some place in our lives where we are not living that salvation in all its fullness – some place where Jesus still isn't shining through us in all His brightness and glory. We cannot settle into the complacency of thinking that just because at some point in the past we walked the aisle and shook the preacher's hand during the invitation hymn there is nothing left for us to do. God calls us out into the world not just because he wants to change the world, but because he also still wants to change us.

In his commentary on this passage, a former professor of mine has asked, "When was Peter converted? When Jesus called him to follow or when Peter confessed that Jesus was the 'The Christ of God' or when Peter discovered that he did not, after all, know who was clean and unclean? Luke will not let us settle down with one account or one moment. Peter was literally 'on the way' as a member of 'the Way.'"¹ Peter's change towards becoming who Jesus wanted him to be was not a single moment in time. It was a process that continued to unfold as Peter was pushed and prodded by the Holy Spirit around every surprising bend in the road. God was never finished with him.

I don't know the eternal fate of Mr. Byrd. When I get to heaven I would love to have the pleasure of seeing him clean and sober and free of the demon of addiction, but I will simply have to trust God's wisdom and mercy to determine whether that will happen. But in the meantime I would hope that the kind of change the townspeople wanted to see in him would never stop happening in us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The real mark of the distinction between Jews and Gentiles that clouded Peter's thinking was the table. They couldn't eat together, because the Jews considered the Gentiles unclean. It's no coincidence that Peter's vision of the inclusivity of God's grace had to do with eating. By the same token, the real mark of the conversion that God wrought in people's lives was the table. In the church, by the grace of God, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, males and females, slaves and masters could sit at the same table and feast together on the mercies of God. This morning, we

Our Conversion: A Never-Ending Drama

Acts 11:1-18

May 6, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

eat together at the Lord's Table as a sign of that transforming grace God works in our lives. Jesus has taken strangers like you and me and bound us together as the community of God's elect, called to serve him in the world. As you eat, marvel at the fact that these people around you, these people whose faults and quirks and shortcomings you know so well, could be counted among the redeemed. And then, marvel even more at the fact that you can to.

¹ William H. Willimon, *Acts in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 102-103.