

“CAN LIFE BE CHANGED?”

April 22, 2007

Acts 9: 1-18

Here's a question for you: Can life be changed? I can't tell you how many times in a counseling situation people have asked that question. Can a son or daughter or grandchild move in a less destructive path? Can our marriage regain the intimacy it once had? It's a question we may have addressed to ourselves at one time or other. Am I pretty much stuck where I am, captive to genetics and upbringing, or can my life take a different shape? For Christians that is a very spiritual concern.

In the New Testament when we talk of changed lives who comes to mind? The Apostle Paul stands out. Here's the usual scenario for what happened to Paul: A persecutor of Christians, walking along the road to Damascus and zap his life is changed from a destructive path to more positive endeavors. That's been the traditional interpretation of the passage read from Acts 9 but where does that leave those of us who never have had such a traumatic experience? Can change come about in less dramatic ways? Beverly Gaventa and Krister Stendahl, New Testament theologians, offer a different point of view regarding Paul's Damascus experience that may be of help in answering that question.

Let's begin by looking more closely at Paul's life so that he can become a model for change in us. We know that Paul grew up as a Hebrew with Roman citizenship, which was very important in the First Century. He was steeped in his Hebrew religious heritage and sincerely believed that Christians were perverting the faith of Israel. Something happened to change his opinion and his life. The Damascus experience is mentioned 3 times in the New Testament. Paul in the first chapter of his letter to the Galatians spoke less dramatically and simply referred to a deep and revealing sense of divine presence. Whatever took place, clearly Paul felt God calling him to move in a new direction.

Stendahl and Gaventa point out that Paul's life before the road to Damascus was not evil. He wasn't what we would call a "bad" person. His persecution of Christians might be misdirected but it came from good intentions: the desire to keep the Hebrew faith pure and intact. They also suggest that after becoming a believer Paul showed no remorse or guilt over his previous persecution of Christians.

Thus, their conclusion is that Christians cannot legitimately use the word "conversion" to speak of what happened to Paul because that infers a drastic change from one way of life to another. Paul had been religious and continued to be so. Paul had worshipped one God and continued to do so. Paul had been very serious in his faith commitment and continued to hold fast to that belief. He was not moving from a life of hedonism to purity or from atheism to belief. His life story was not like that of "old born drunk" that is described so vividly in the AA Big Book. That is why their conclusion is that rather than speaking of conversion, which implies a 180-degree turn that we should speak of transformation. It was a transformation, I would add, that had its beginnings long before Paul ever set foot on the road to Damascus.

Do you sense the difference between the approach of the New Testament scholars and what you are apt to hear on the TV religious shows? The latter tell how bad you are and how you have to change and that you need to get hit with a thunderbolt. That may describe life experience for some of us but I suspect many of us have not followed that course.

Let me put that assumption in the form of a question: Would it be fair to say that more of us are like that elder son who stayed home in the parable Jesus told than the one who went away and blew his life on wine, women and song? I know that would be true for my life and it always has bothered me that I could not easily identify with "the conversion principle" as a necessary starting point for ALL

religious experience. If Gaventa and Stendahl are correct, however, Paul did not have a dramatic 180-degree switch but rather a different attitude and perspective emerged regarding what it meant to serve the one true God. Could it be that if there is any need for change in our lives it comes at the point of gaining deeper insight into what it means to serve the one true God? Certainly we believe in God. Even as our nation becomes more secular polls show a very high percentage of people acknowledging a greater Power but are we really living out the 1st Commandment which says that God should come before all else? I get a feeling for myself and others that we may be splitting our loyalties. Of course, we believe in God but we also believe in family, in sports, in getting ahead. There is an old story about an affluent woman whose husband had just died and she was discussing funeral plans with the pastor: "My husband would want two songs at his funeral," she said. "Amazing Grace" and Frank Sinatra's 'I Did It My Way'."

We chuckle but could it be true that, like Paul, our serving God often becomes misdirected or diffused by all the other demands of life? One way to think about this matter is to hear the question addressed to the Apostle on the road to Damascus being directed right at you. Instead of, "Paul, what are you doing with your life?" how about "Bob, or Sue or Joe, what are you doing with your life?" There are many answers: "I am trying to be a good friend, a family person, a hard worker." But always there is another question: "what is God calling me to do?"

Our response may not mean drastic changes in our lives, though it might. What it will mean is taking Christ much more seriously as we go about our various roles in life: friend, worker, and parent. Years ago I read a story in a magazine that you may recall. It was entitled "The Day that changed a life". It was a true story about a woman whose influence so elevated the atmosphere of the office in which she worked that her employer noticed it and asked her what had changed her attitude. She told him that several months previous she had made up her mind to live one complete day as if there were a God who loves and cares for us and judges and guides us. She always had believed in God but for this one day she would live as though that belief were her touchstone. It had made such a difference to her, to the way she felt at work and dealt with other people, and with her problems, that she continued the experience a 2nd day and a 3rd and now she felt God closer than breathing and nearer than her hands and feet.

"She always had believed in God but for this one day she would live as though that belief were her touchstone." That quote may hold the key to understanding what can happen in our lives. Paul didn't totally discard his previous faith construct. Instead he built upon his former value system and reshaped the direction of his life. We have numerous building blocks around us, which call for loyalty and pull us in so many directions. For many of us, change may begin not with a drastic overhaul but in simply making sure each and every day that the strongest and firmest building block, Jesus the Christ, supports everything else rather than it simply being one among many.

Life can change, can be added to, and can become fulfilled. There is nothing wrong with conversion. It is good for the soul if you are headed totally in the wrong direction but let's not assume it has to be that way or nothing. Transformation of your heart and mind, what's important and what is not, also may need consideration. It can begin this very day if we open our lives to God's direction and make sure that we have the right building block as our foundation.