

Sermon for the Festival of the Conversion of Saint Paul: January 25, 2015  
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The zealous Pharisee Saul, who raged like a madman with hands dripping with the blood of murdered Christians, became the bold Apostle Paul, dripping from the water of baptism, forgiven by Jesus Himself and sent out into distant lands to be His apostle instead. But did the Lord call the Apostle Paul specifically to plant and build churches, to convert thousands of Jews and later, Gentiles merely upon hearing one of his sermons? Was Paul sent with a specific program and agenda in mind as his marching orders? Did he have a mission statement bestowed upon him, or a set of goals against which he could compare his results at the end of the year?

This was the call statement of the Apostle Paul, straight from the divine mouth of the ascended Lord Jesus Himself. He said: "He is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name." Only two tasks Paul was sent to do: carry My name, and suffer for the sake of My name. Those two holy works would be enough for His chosen instrument, and then the Lord would accomplish the rest of the mission.

For we are given no indication that the preacher Ananias of Damascus, who baptized and laid his hands on Saul, that he was especially talented in any marketing or managing relationships or business savvy. He wasn't the popular, world-renowned evangelist who would graciously hand on the mantle to his successor. In fact, Ananias was nothing like what Paul ended

up to be. He was quite simply the humble instrument of God, he was the faint spark who Jesus used to set on fire the mission work that He would have Paul do throughout the Roman Empire. You should note that outside of this incident, the Holy Spirit doesn't record the name of this Ananias anywhere else in the Bible.

Why do I point out these things? Because nothing impresses you more about a person than their credentials. Success in this world depends on things that you can see, things that make sense to your human mind. Results drive the train, do everything to satisfy the bottom line, you've got to outlast the competition, the weakling is simply going to get trampled on, the company that doesn't innovate just wastes away and is forgotten. The contestants on whatever reality TV competition you care to watch—they scratch and scrape at each other in their make-believe training, strategizing and hoop-jumping, while they fight for a reward that at best wouldn't last for them longer than the death bed.

In your mind, as well as in mine, the illusion is that it's very much the same with church. You won't get a following of people unless you've got what it takes. You may wink at the smoke and mirrors of vision plans and mission statements, but you know where the real motivation comes from. You can talk up anything you want, but if there's no substance there, you won't get much more of a following than a few gullible souls. The young prophet Jeremiah was sure impressed by people

who seemed to have what it takes. So much so that he was convinced he was not one of them. God called this priest to be His messenger, and the man's first response was that he was both too young and not able to speak well, just like Moses complained about himself centuries before.

Jeremiah thought he knew what the credentials were because they were what the average Israelite understood as the skills a prophet needed to have. Of course, the best-equipped men for the job in those days were probably the false prophets. There were certainly a lot of them running around. You might say that the market was pretty saturated at this point. Since they did not have the Word of the Lord, they convinced the people to follow the other gods instead, and they succeeded; they had prosperous enterprises, they got the results they wanted. Jeremiah may have believed the truth, but he still thought that he needed to include the fancy stuff in order to compete.

Ananias had a few misgivings too. He might have rejoiced upon hearing that the bloodiest persecutor the young Christian Church has known so far was suddenly stricken with blindness. But then Jesus revealed to him that he was to restore sight to this same person and baptize him. Certainly there had to be some mistake! Somebody else should have fit the job description of apostle of Christ to the ends of the earth. At least he's got to be friendly to our cause to begin with. But God did not even take that into consideration. Beyond the best reasoning skills of sinful human beings, Jesus Himself chose this raving, bloodthirsty Jew to carry His name

and to suffer. And that is how the Church would grow and spread? Absolutely! If Paul would carry the name of Jesus without any compromise and suffer all things, even death, rather than pull away from the Lord, then God's work would be done and, thanks to God alone, the Church would grow and increase.

Does it have to be any different for the Lord's Church today? Is there anything more nowadays that needs to be attached to the apostolic calling of carrying the name of Jesus and suffering for it? Does the Christian Church need the institutions, the personalities, the programs and other things that human sensibility tells us she needs? You are offended because the Church seems weak. You are put off because sinners and less committed Christians upset you and take everything for granted. Or you stay in your own narrow frame of mind and refuse to use your resources of time, talent or treasure on an opportunity that God has shown you to use you in helping others. Your unbelieving, doubting, offended sinful nature needs a blinding, Damascus road experience too! You must get rid of the sin that entangles you, flush it down with the cleansing water of forgiveness in your baptism, so that you can run the Christian race along with the Apostle Paul, who by the way, remained as zealous as ever, just turned in the right direction.

For although Jesus Himself came to this earth in a weak, servant's form, without the proper "human" credentials of say, a mighty warrior or king, His suffering and death are nevertheless the greatest treasures you can ever have. When it looked like a

defeat, there when He was hanging on the cross, He was actually completing the most astounding victory over Satan, sin and death. With the blood streaming from His mutilated body, He was laying the foundation of your faith, and guaranteeing your entry into the heavenly mansion that He is preparing for you.

Though you were born in the condition of sin and an enemy of God, and in His eyes you're no different from Saul, the Lord calls you anyway to carry His name and suffer, if need be, for His sake. You may not be a specifically-trained church worker, and the Lord knows we need more and more of them, but nevertheless you do have a calling that your Heavenly Father specifically gave to you. In that vocation you carry His name before others whom you meet and in that vocation you will find the cross that He lays upon your shoulders to bear gladly as God's sign of love. You gain the strength you need for your Godly work from the powerful Word of God and the Body and Blood of Christ found here in eating and drinking simple, unassuming elements of bread and wine.

Let the light of Christ blind you to the impressive credentials that dazzle the sinful flesh. Be comforted that the Lord will sustain His Church, even in apparent weakness, in His own way. Resist the unbelieving urge that hangs all hope on a certain type of individual or institution, any program or activity. Hear the forgiving, loving Word of Jesus, for this Word alone will endure forever. Call on His name in prayer, even when you make your plans and goals, for it is that name that you carry as His chosen people, and for that name

you may suffer, and with that name on your lips you will eventually breathe your last and enter into eternal life.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.