

Acknowledgment (John 9:1-41)

"You can't be born again," I said, "you're a Lutheran. You are the chairman of the board of trustees."

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [March 3, 1999](#) issue

In a church I served, one of the pillars of the congregation stopped by my office just before services to tell me he'd been "born again."

"You've been what?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "last week I visited my brother-in-law's church, the Running River of Life Tabernacle, and I don't know what it was, but something happened and I'm born again."

"You can't be born again," I said, "you're a Lutheran. You are the chairman of the board of trustees." He was brimming with joy, but I was sulking. Why? Because spiritual renewal is wonderful as long as it occurs within acceptable, usually mainline, channels and does not threaten my understanding of God.

In her novel *Revelation*, Peggy Payne tells of a Presbyterian minister who experiences a theophany. One afternoon, while grilling steaks in the backyard, he hears the voice of God speaking to him. It's a revelation. It's the kind of revelation that will change his life; he will never be the same. The rest of the story tells of the price he pays for revelation. Do the leaders of his congregation rejoice with him? Not exactly. They do provide free psychiatric care and paid administrative leave.

I work in a university, and can well imagine how the school would react if one of its chaplains were to announce that he had been the recipient of a direct revelation. After appropriate counseling, he would be transferred to "Development." We would do deep background investigations, recheck his transcripts, reread his references. Eventually he would have to go, because he was claiming to see things to which we are blind.

That's the way the formerly blind man found it. In John's Gospel the story of his cure takes exactly two verses; the controversy surrounding the cure, 39 verses. And that, as Paul Harvey would say, is the *rest* of the story.

The rest of the story is that the church has always been pretty good at investigating irregularities but not so good at acknowledging the power of God that can be contained by no religious premises. It is not difficult to sympathize with the Pharisees. They were only attempting what many of us have been trained to do: observe, describe and explain the phenomena. Haven't you ever listened to the testimony of someone who has been "healed" at Lourdes or Tulsa, who's thrown away the crutches? And haven't you wanted to ask a few follow-up questions? Have you never felt a twinge of doubt when all those glamorous but corrupt celebrities-courtesans and congressmen-whose sins are so much more interesting than yours, manage to get born again just as their scandals are cresting in the media? Where does all this religion *really* come from?

The question of origins pervades the Gospel of John. In our story we have the ancient version not of *Who's on First?* but of *Where's He from?* The authorities sink to the oldest of all debate tactics: assail the source of your opponent's argument. Poison the well. Where is this Jesus from? What rabbinical school did he attend? Where did he learn to break God's law? The formerly blind man replies, "He restored my sight. Where do you think he's from?"

Does this story mean that you must possess special knowledge to be a follower of Jesus? Must you see the way God sees?

No-not knowledge, but *acknowledgment*.

The formerly blind man did not know all the correct religious phrases with which to interpret his salvation. He was not pious in the traditional sense or even respectful of his elders. What he knew for sure was that once upon a time he sat in darkness, and now the whole world was drenched in sunlight. And he acknowledged that.

"One thing I know," he said. And as he makes his witness to Jesus, we realize that the man blind from birth has a multitude of sons and daughters with their own stories to tell. "One thing I know," one of you might say (sounding like the Samaritan woman in John 4), "is that when I was going through my divorce I hurt so much I couldn't sleep or eat, and I was so filled with hate I couldn't think, but somehow I got through it, and I've come to recognize that the *somehow* was Jesus."

"One thing I know." How is that for ironic understatement? As if the only teensy little thing you happen to know is-who saved your life! No, you start not with special knowledge but with acknowledgment. You may begin not with a public profession but with a prayer to the Light of the World.

The man's profession has a terrible consequence for him and for all of us. He is cast out of the synagogue. He is cut off from Torah, family, the sweet-smelling incense of the Sabbath, the certitude of the Law-all because he looked deeply and directly into the Light.

If J. Louis Martyn and other scholars are right, this story reflects the historic parting of the ways between the synagogue and the Jews who believed in Jesus. We were once so close. Just how close we still are can be seen in those moments when we acknowledge our dependence on God, and place no limits on who and how God saves in Jesus Christ. If we read this story as an ironic comedy and nothing more, we miss the loneliness of its final scene in which Jesus and the man converse outside the synagogue. But if we catch its underlying pathos, we will see this story for the tragedy it really is, and wait upon God to write a new ending.