

Turn in the road: Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

by [Mary Schertz](#) in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

Christians tend to compare their personal conversion experiences to Saul's encounter on the road to Damascus. Not all of us, of course, talk freely about what happened in us and to us on the way to becoming Christian. Our levels of comfort with such talk vary widely depending on our congregational culture, our notions of evangelism and our ability to be self-revelatory. But when we do think about that journey, and when we're willing to talk about it, we say that our conversion was—or was not—a Damascus Road. We tell our young people that their experience does not need to be a Damascus Road experience, although it can be. There are many paths of Christian transformation—and the light from heaven is only one of them.

In much of our thinking about this story, there is a tinge of wistfulness, a yearning. Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus was so definite, after all. So sure. Even if we dare to describe our own story as similar in some way, it pales next to the drama of the light from heaven. We do not really want something so strange and frightening to happen to us, but we would like the definitive proof that God does exist and that God cares enough about our lives and how we spend them to stop us in our tracks.

But perhaps we focus too much on the style, the process, and not enough on the content. One aspect we sometimes overlook in reading this passage is that violence is the key issue. Saul is characterized in the opening verses as a man of violence. He is a young man in this story; we have been introduced to him in Acts 7 as the young person who took care of the coats of the people who stoned Stephen. The narrator notes that Saul approved of the execution, and he is pictured dragging men and women believers from their homes and imprisoning them.

But then the story veers away from Saul and the tragic events in Jerusalem to follow Philip to Samaria and on to Gaza. When we return to the story of Saul in Acts 9, his violence is still very much a problem. He is breathing threats of murder, obtaining letters from the high priest that authorize him to search for believers in Damascus and bring them back in chains to Jerusalem.

Saul is described almost exclusively in terms of his violence, and it is this violence that Jesus addresses when he speaks out of the heavenly light. Saul hears a voice and the double address of “Saul, Saul”—alerting the biblical reader that something worth paying attention to is coming next. “Why do you persecute me?” Jesus asks. Saul does not immediately recognize this voice—and when Jesus identifies himself he addresses the issue of violence again, this time in a statement rather than a question: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

By identifying himself as the one whom Saul is persecuting, Jesus identifies with the believers in their suffering. This identification is in the same spirit as the story of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. But Jesus is not only identifying with the believers here. He is also making Saul’s violence the central issue of his conversion—an emphasis that Saul later confirms when he describes his pre-Damascus Road self as one who persecuted the believers to the point of death.

Another aspect that we sometimes miss in our interpretation of what happened on the road to Damascus is that this conversion of Saul is not an individual matter. The community of believers in Damascus plays a critical role. Saul is undergoing his own catharsis; he neither eats nor drinks for three days, and is blind. But another man, Ananias, is about to be transformed too. When Ananias first hears from the Lord what his part in the drama is to be, he is understandably doubtful. He protests. He knows Saul by reputation, and that reputation is not only unsavory but frightening. In his dialog with the Lord, however, Ananias is assured that this unsavory and violent character is indeed someone whom the Lord has chosen. We hear the transformation in Ananias’s mind and heart when he calls Saul “Brother.”

The light on the road and the voice that spoke out of the light stopped Saul cold, but his transformation is taken the next step by the ministrations of Ananias as a representative of the believing community in Damascus. The insight that Saul claims in the last verse of the passage, that Jesus is the Son of God, is not a private matter between him and Jesus: “It took a community.” And a man of violence is then transformed into a missionary for God.

We will not all be stopped in the road by a brilliant light. We will not all hear a voice calling us by name out of that light, nor have a vision in which the Lord instructs us to go to a specific street and find a specific person and perform a specific ritual. But we can be transformed in the ways Saul was transformed. Relinquishing the violence in ourselves and in our culture, trusting the Christian community to help us do that, is not easy. But it is what Jesus, calling to us from his solidarity with the oppressed

and persecuted, is asking. Answering that call will transform us.