

About face

By [David P. Gushee](#)

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In this week's epistle reading, Paul demonstrates that mix of humility and pride that so definitively marks off his writing from any other voice in the Bible.

Paul is proud of the fact that if anyone wants to get in some kind of macho contest over the marks of righteousness in Jewish tradition, he would win. He's got it all, from circumcision to full Jewish identity, Benjaminite lineage, knowledge and practice of Jewish law, training and identity as a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church to boot.

But Paul's encounter with Christ has led him to treat that entire heritage as excrement. It is hard to overstate how shocking this choice of words is here. There is no gainsaying how offensive it must have been and could still be to those who continue to value the heritage and identity that Paul has rejected for himself.

But Paul is not worried about them right now. He has turned decisively away from every aspect of his former identity and counted it as worthless. He has turned decisively toward a new identity, in what Nietzsche would have called a revaluation of all values. The one who fiercely persecuted Christ and his people has now come to value a relationship with Christ just as fiercely, as the entire purpose of his existence. Paul [wants to know Christ](#), and not just things about him but specific dimensions of him: the experience of sharing in his sufferings and in the power of his resurrection, in this life and the life to come.

This is the ultimate about face recorded in scripture. Its radicality has challenged Christians ever since, and not always in constructive ways. Conversionist traditions such as my own Baptist brand of Christianity have tended to lift up Paul's reversal as setting the standard for our own. The best conversions were the juiciest ones, involving the deepest descent into sin in order to set up the grandest and most profound conversion stories.

Pity the good little Baptist ten-year-old who really did believe in Jesus and wanted to walk the aisle but had little grotesque sin to repent. Eventually an incrementalist or developmentalist kind of conversion narrative forced its way into acceptance in churches rooted in a Pauline conversionism. But the latter paradigm often resurfaced when that ten-year-old got off the straight and narrow as a teen. Second and third baptisms, with real repentance of real sin, sometimes followed.

Religious psychology aside, the starkness of Paul's move here does challenge those who claim to be Christians today. It has not required much in the way of an about face for most of us to fit together Christian faith and regular life in American culture. We don't have to count it all excrement. . .which can be very confusing.

*Additional lectionary columns by Gushee appear in the March 9 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*