

“I saw the light”

The significance of the Apostle Paul’s conversion testimony

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In the traditional Amish-Mennonite congregation in which I was reared, the word *testimony* had a particular and specific definition. Testimony was what we spoke just prior to our baptisms, and also what some of us got to retell in periodic Sunday evening “testimony services.” Testimony was our intensely personal story of conversion, our unique and individual accounting of the transformation that had taken place in our lives as a result of our repentance from a life of sin and rebellion and our turning toward God. Of course, most of us had grown up within the embrace of the

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church and had been nurtured there. We had not lived lives of hostility toward God or of debauchery, so the crafting of our testimonies sometimes required creative soul-searching for ways to express “That was then; this is now.”

But testimony is much broader in scope than the definition given to it by the ecclesial community of my youth. Testimony provides our fundamental access to history and so is at the heart not only of historical studies but also of biblical studies. Testimony is, at its core, storytelling. Testimony is a recounting of what we have seen and heard. It is our connection to the past. It always is, of course, a particular interpretation of the past.

Testimony has its own ideology and theology, its own presuppositions and point of view, its own narrative and rhetorical structures. If we are to gain access to history, if we are to attain any knowledge of the past, we must put faith in the trustworthiness of some testimony.¹ New Testament scholarship is currently producing groundbreaking work on the Gospels as eyewitness testimony to the historical Jesus.²

For the purposes of this article, however, I want to turn back to my original, more restricted understanding and definition of testimony: personal conversion story. The particular conversion story explored in this essay is the most well-known in the whole of the New Testament and perhaps in the whole of Christian history, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, known to us as the Apostle Paul.

A thrice-told tale

How significant is Paul's conversion story? So important that Luke retells this story three times in the Acts of the Apostles, first where Paul's conversion actually occurs in the narrative (9:1–19) and then twice more as Paul's own testimony—in court, no less. Paul proclaims his conversion story to the Sanhedrin after his arrest in Jerusalem (22:3–21). Then we meet this story a third and final time, when Paul, now a prisoner in the city of Caesarea, offers his conversion story as testimony before the Jewish King Agrippa (26:1–26).

In this essay I wish to briefly probe the question, Why did Luke feel compelled to recount Paul's conversion story, in such detail, *three* times? What is there about this story that makes it so central, so important, to the early Christian story? Luke is an eloquent and economical writer who rarely repeats himself. He simply does not retell stories of any great length or comparable detail. Paul's thrice-recounted conversion story is the lone exception.³ Unless we assume that Luke somehow managed a massively careless editorial lapse in his otherwise brilliant work of literary artistry—and not just once but twice—we need to inquire into Luke's motive for repeating the story again, and again.

To what does Paul testify?

Yet, as important as Paul's conversion story obviously is, it is not the central story. The fact that Luke records this story three times does not indicate that Paul's testimony about his own conversion is the most important thing he has to proclaim when he travels from city to city preaching the good news. Paul's conversion story is not the core testimony, the *kerygma*,⁴ the gospel proclamation.

What, then, is the gospel message that Paul preached? Luke tells us that Paul, immediately after his conversion, “began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20;

my translation). Paul himself repeatedly insists that he preaches Jesus (see, for example, 1 Cor. 1:23; 2 Cor. 4:5). As Paul travelled throughout the Roman world, he proclaimed one message and one message exclusively: the “good news about Jesus” (Acts 17:18; compare 13:32, 14:7, 15, 21).

And what, exactly, is this good news about Jesus? Must it not be the content of Luke’s Gospel? The first book Luke wrote in his two-part series is undoubtedly the testimony that Paul preached in city after city: the stories around Jesus’ birth; the miracles; the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son; the Beatitudes; the confrontations with Jewish religious leaders; and all this gospel culminating in the grand finale of that final week in which Jesus was betrayed, arrested, tried, crucified, and finally raised to life. This is the testimony, the kerygma, the gospel, that Paul proclaimed and taught in city after city, and which Luke researched and recorded.

The link between conversion story and kerygma

It is in the context of this all-important, all-surpassing Jesus story that Paul ventures to tell his own personal story, as intersected by and drawn into the big story, the story of stories. It is within the grand context of the Jesus story that Paul is not ashamed to repeatedly proclaim his own testimony. And each retelling displays Paul’s thrill and wonder at having seen and heard Jesus.

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From that moment of encounter through the rest of his amazing life, all that Saul of Tarsus ever said and did, and particularly all that we have on record as having been written down by him, flows directly out of this epic encounter with his Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

How are the three recountings of Paul’s own testimony alike? What stays the same through each retelling? What is the kerygma, you might say, of Paul’s conversion testimony? First, all three accounts describe clearly Paul’s

status prior to his conversion: he was a Pharisee zealous for God and God’s honour, determined to stamp out those who, from his perspective, blasphemed the holy name. Paul the raging persecutor was the earliest Christians’ greatest nightmare. Second, all

three accounts agree that Paul's conversion took place along the road to Damascus where he was headed from Jerusalem, having been sent and authorized by the Jerusalem religious leaders to arrest those caught up in the spreading plague of Jesus followers.

Third, each account mentions the powerful light from heaven that flashed down on Paul and his travelling companions, knocking Paul to the ground. Fourth, the dialogue between Jesus and Paul in all three retellings begins with Jesus' words, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" followed by Paul's response, "Who are you, Lord?" and then Jesus' rejoinder, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Finally, though the wording and context in each retelling differ, each of the three accounts of Paul's conversion includes his call. God has chosen and set apart this Pharisee to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles.

But the story as related above is far from complete. The full story of Paul's conversion requires all three rather extensively diverging accounts. Apparently neither Luke nor Paul feels any compulsion to harmonize the three testimonies. Many inconsistencies (or so they appear to us) are allowed to stand. Who actually

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did see the light and hear the voice from heaven—Paul alone, or Paul and his companions (9:7; 22:9; 26:13–14)? And where, exactly, did Paul receive his call—on the Damascus road (26:17), through Ananias in Damascus (9:15), or later in Jerusalem (22:21)?

The scope of this article does not permit an analysis of the many ways the three versions both diverge from and also flesh out the kerygma of Paul's conversion story. But these

additions to the central story are not unimportant. Like a music teacher who plays a tune over and over until the student knows the song by heart, or a composer who introduces a theme and then returns to it again and again, so Luke tells Paul's conversion story in Acts 9, and adds texture when he comes back to it in chapter 22 and then once more in chapter 26. It is in this final version that Luke adds particularly intricate harmonies to the main tune.⁵ Clearly, pride of place goes to this third retelling, in the decisive position. This grand finale uses the full orchestra, the

other two accounts in a sense leading up to the climactic recapitulation of the theme in chapter 26.

Who occupies centre stage?

Are there clues, then, within this third and final retelling of Paul's conversion testimony story that might point to Luke's possible motives for wanting us to learn this particular tune by heart? Just as in chapter 22, Paul's final court testimony is really no defence at all but rather courageous proclamation. Paul is not telling and retelling his own story in order to thrust himself onto centre stage. Far from it: the exact opposite is true. Paul's goal in telling his conversion story at his own trials is to get himself out of the way and put Jesus at the centre of our attention.

How, then, does Paul manage in his testimony to place his Lord front and centre? Notice what Paul states in 26:22–23 about the nature of his testimony: in Paul's preaching, the Messiah himself is proclaiming “light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” Paul's reference to this light that comes from God uses stock biblical language going right back to the very beginning in Genesis 1. God created humanity in God's own image, in order that all humanity would reflect God's glory and light into the rest of creation. When humanity failed in this God-given vocation, God called a specific people, Israel, to reflect God and shine the light of God's glory for the nations. Yet Israel too failed miserably in their sacred image-bearing vocation. Who could fulfil the divine vocation? Who would be God's perfect image to reflect the light of God into the world? The Messiah Jesus, the one who turns out to actually *be* the light of the world! And now this Jesus confronts Israel's most hard-line Pharisee, Rabbi Paul, strikes him down by the glorious light from heaven, and calls him back into the sacred vocation that was Israel's—to reflect the light of the world to all the nations.

No wonder, then, that Luke tells and retells this conversion story in symphonic repetition. The conversion story of Paul is the story of Israel's conversion and restoration to her original vocation: to reflect God's glory, the light of Jesus, to the nations. Paul is the forerunner who blazes the trail for the whole people of God to become images of the divine once again. The glory of the light of God has overwhelmed him, and he has become a true image of

God. Converted and called, Paul will now reflect God's light into the dark world of the nations. Finally, Israel's great vocation will begin to be fulfilled in her son Paul. As Jesus lived out Israel's story perfectly and took on Israel's vocation, so now Paul is taking on Jesus' vocation to be God's image, shining forth God's glory into the world.

Testifying to the glory of God

How, then, does Paul tell his conversion testimony so as to reflect God's glory into the world? He realizes that in order for us to see God's glory, we must see Jesus, so it is Jesus that he puts front and centre. Consider what Paul so boldly declares in 26:22–23: that in his preaching of Jesus it is really Jesus himself who is preaching Jesus. That is, the one proclaimed in Paul's faithful testimony once again becomes the proclaimer.

This is a daring reversal of the gospel story itself. In Luke's Gospel, we encounter Jesus first as the teacher, the rabbi who

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proclaims the good news of God's kingdom. As we move through Luke's Gospel to its climactic moment, the story stuns us with the revelation that Rabbi Jesus *becomes* the message, becomes the good news. The teacher becomes the lesson; the good news announcer becomes the gospel.

Not only does Jesus reveal the light of God; Jesus *is* the light. In his very own person, Jesus becomes the good news, the testimony. The kerygma is Jesus himself in his self-giving act of laying down his life for all humankind.

The proclaimer becomes the proclaimed.⁶ Now, however, Paul makes the startling observation that the proclaimed has once again become the proclaimer in and through Paul's testimony. It is the Lord Jesus who is preaching through Paul's faithful testimony. Thus Paul finds himself included in the kerygma. Indeed, the kerygma includes him.

Earlier in his ministry, Paul succinctly summed up his vocation this way: "God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (Gal. 1:15–16; my translation). The proclamation *and* the proclaimed, the message *and* the

Messiah are revealed in Paul as he bears faithful witness to his conversion before all people.

Thus Paul's conversion testimony challenges each of us who has seen the light of Christ to follow in the steps of this apostle to the nations, our forerunner who has blazed the trail ahead of us. The early Anabaptists recognized that conversion and vocation cannot be separated. Early Anabaptist converts were each commissioned at their baptism to preach the gospel.⁷ If the light of Christ has shone on us, then as restored images of God we are compelled to reflect that same light to others. In our own preaching, then, let us not be timid about retelling our particular conversion stories. For in so doing, we testify to the light and glory of God that shines out into this world's darkness. Testimony, then, is our central vocation. The great story of God, centred in Jesus Christ, has drawn our own stories into it. The kerygma includes us too. So let us not be ashamed to reflect God's light, the light of Jesus, out into all creation. Through our faithful and public testimony we too may be assured that it is Jesus himself who proclaims the good news to the whole world.

Notes

¹ See the wonderful discussion on biblical testimony in Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 36–50.

² For one of the best current discussions on the character and the centrality of testimony in the New Testament, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

³ The one partial exception may be the story of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, which is also reported first in the narrative (Acts 10:1–48), and then recounted again in two speeches, though each time in skeletal form and without the details (11:1–18; 15:7–11).

⁴ *Kerygma* is the Greek word used in the New Testament for preaching. In biblical and theological discussions, this term has come to denote the irreducible essence of Christian apostolic preaching.

⁵ I am indebted to N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 210–11, for this musical analogy.

⁶ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 348.

⁷ See Wolfgang Schäufele, "The Missionary Vision and Activity of the Anabaptist Laity," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36 (April 1962): 102–3, 105, 108.

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