

From Roundup to Miracle-Gro

Chapter 10

Back in the tool shed by the garden I own two wonderful products.

The first item is Roundup, the weed killer.

It works really great.

All you do is spray it on the plant you want to get rid of
and somehow the poison is taken from the leaves
down to the root and the plant dies in about two weeks.

The second item is Miracle-Gro, the plant fertilizer.

It works really great too.

All you do is spray it on the plant you want to grow
and somehow the nutrients are taken from the leaves
down to the root and the plant takes off in about two weeks.

As anyone can imagine,

I would not want to put Roundup on my tomato plants
or Miracle-Gro on the thornweed.

In this essay we look at the dramatic conversion of Saul.

Through the surrendering of himself to the Lord,
Jesus was able to turn the weed killer into a super plant growing solution.

And if the Lord could do that then with an avowed enemy of the gospel,
what could he do now with those who conspire
to subvert our best efforts at growing the Lord's garden
by appealing to those eight most lethal-stop-growth words:

“We have never done it that way before.”

Saul, The Strong Keeper of Tradition

Before his conversion, Saul strongly advocated and practiced the traditional Jewish religion which had been handed down for hundreds of years. From Sinai, Israel had constantly rebelled against the law by committing idolatry. After the destruction of the Temple and the captivity under Babylon, steps were undertaken to insure that this national tragedy would never happen again.

Under the reforms carried out by Ezra and Nehemiah, the law and the Temple were placed at the center of the nation's life. The Pharisees were entrusted with both the preservation and teaching of the law to the people. This is the position that Saul aspired to:

Paul makes clear his theological position before his conversion when he says of himself: ‘according to the law a Pharisee’ (Phil. 3.5; cf. Acts 26.5). According to Acts 23.6 his parents were also Pharisees. For Paul the Pharisee the Torah was the decisive factor in his life, being the only and assured means of obtaining righteousness. So he was exceedingly jealous in learning and observing both the written and oral Torah and advanced in this far beyond his colleagues (Gal 1.14f). Indeed, he could say, he was ‘blameless according to the criterion of the righteousness that rests on the law’ (Phil 3.6).¹

Before his conversion, the law was Saul's lord. It was the foundation upon which his own life and the life of the community was built. Anything that would threaten its well-being must be strongly resisted. The Pharisees argued that the teaching of the early church did not harmonize with the law. After all, had not the law pronounced a curse on anyone who was hung from a tree:

If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

At His trial Jesus had been accused of the offense of blasphemy for claiming to be God: “Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” ‘He is worthy of death,’ they answered” (Matthew 26:65-66).

For breaking the Torah, Jesus was executed on the tree of shame, seemingly cursed by both God and man. To both the Jews steeped in the law, and the Greeks laden with philosophy,

the cross was the ultimate puzzle. How could Christians now claim that Jesus is the Righteous Lord when He died cursed by God on a cross?

To the Jews, “the Christian proclamation of the crucified Jesus as the Messiah was a contradiction in terms.”² Saul himself took personal offense “to the message of the crucified Messiah as a Pharisaic scribe on the basis of his understanding of the Torah.”³ “For in his view God could not possibly have made him the Messiah whom he had cursed.”⁴

To Saul, the obvious curse and punishment of God upon Jesus for His blasphemy, must now be extended to his followers who did not follow the Torah:

Through the execution of this criminal on the tree of shame, God’s just judgment on him had become manifest to all. The assertion of his former followers that God had raise him from the dead, had exalted him to himself ‘in power’ (Rom. 1:3f.) to the right hand of God and appointed him Messiah, Son of God and coming judge of the world, had to be opposed with all resolution.⁵

Like Phineas, Saul felt compelled to “to enter the breach in ‘zeal for the Torah’, to bring down a just punishment on their enemies or to drive them out.”⁶ For the zealous Saul “could hardly bear such an attack upon the law and the Temple cult, two of the three pillars upon which according to Pirque Aboth 1.2 the world rests (the last being good works).”⁷

The clash between tradition and new directions for the local church today is not as intense as when Saul: “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1,2). However, significant tension erupts when change in the existence and direction of the church is contemplated. The next section illustrates how this tension might arise in the major and minor issues which face a local church.

The Barrier of Tradition

In the book, *Leading and Managing Your Church*, Carl George and Robert Logan have a chapter entitled “The Berry-Bucket Theory.” George and Logan attempt to illustrate the tension that often arises between those who have been at a church for a long time (Formerberries) and those who have recently arrived (Newberries). “A number of areas commonly become the scene of conflict, including uses of church facilities (such as the church bus or kitchen) or budget allocations and building use Over the years a whole system of taboos concerning usages of such things. . . may have accumulated.”⁸ The church kitchen is a case in point:

By definition, no non-Former member can get the church kitchen clean enough to pass Former member inspection. Only a Formerberry can possibly know all the rules about what dishes can be used and which ones can't and what pieces of equipment have a far greater sentimental value than market value.⁹

Church seating and space can also cause tension. Once I was down in the Youth Room of a church where the custodian was using a ruler to set the chairs in exact order. He complained to me that the Youth Leader was always messing up the seating arrangement by putting the chairs in circles or some other non-orderly way.

Turf conflicts can also play an important role. As Newberry activities grow and additional space and facilities are needed or existing facilities need improving, conflict may follow. Often a Sunday-school class or other group has used a certain room in the church for years. The group may have long since diminished from its original size. . . . Woe to the pastor or group of Newberries who suggests "Facilities could be better utilized if. . ." ¹⁰

Those who generally oppose the new are those who have the most invested in the old. When Paul turned the Ephesians away from the worship of idols, the silversmiths bitterly opposed him because it threatened their livelihood:

About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her (Acts 19:23-27).

When Jesus taught that the temple was to be destroyed, the Pharisees were intensely alarmed that their most cherished possession could possibly be removed. When Stephen preached that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands" (Acts 7:48) the whole priestly existence that centered on the earthly temple was threatened.

People are naturally attached to the things they have invested in. The more the investment of resources, the greater the attachment. Such things as the changing of pulpit furniture, pews, paint, carpet color, order or time of service, music, officers or the budget can lead to a real tug of war.

If these items can cause tension, then certainly the issues such as pastoral allocation, a viability study of the church's future, a reorientation of mission or the threat of closure can cause almost unbearable anxiety. Such was the heart-rending anxiety Saul was facing in his conflict with the Christians who were eroding the very foundations of the Jewish religion. Saul was convinced that the tradition must be upheld with all zealousness in the name of the Lord. Only a direct revelation from a loving Lord could overcome the barrier of tradition and turn the proud Pharisee Saul into the humble Apostle Paul.

The Conversion of Saul

The record of Saul meeting the Lord on the road to Damascus is recorded three times in the Book of Acts and is alluded to a number of times in Paul's own writings. The first account given in Acts states:

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (Acts 9:3-6).

The tyrannical hold of tradition on the life of Saul could only be overcome by a direct and powerful meeting with the Lord. The message and death of Stephen had disturbed the conscience of Saul. Now the Divine voice from heaven had identified Himself with His Body the church whom Saul was so intent on destroying. The Lord revealed to Saul that his zeal was mistaken. By persecuting the members of His Body, Saul was also injuring the Lord as the Head of the church. In defending tradition Saul thought he had been fighting for God. Now it is revealed that he had actually been fighting against God.

In that light Paul found himself undone, and the question rose to his lips: "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" He is now ready to renounce himself and to take upon him the cross of Christ, to follow no more the inclination of his own sinful heart, but the guidance of his heavenly Lord,—to lay down himself a living consecrated sacrifice on the altar of Jesus Christ. He was ready to speak, as his Saviour once spoke in bitter agony, "Thy will be done"¹¹

The essence of Paul's conversion was changing allegiance from the lord of tradition to the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul decided to desert the well-developed traditions of the elders and intentionally chose to follow the crucified, risen and exalted Lord. The revelation the Lord gave to Paul on the Damascus Road alone "dramatically reoriented his life of devotion to the will of God from Pharisaic Judaism to primitive Christianity."¹²

From the Damascus experience we learn that the barrier of tradition can only truly be overcome by a surrender of the heart to the Lord. Paul was converted when he changed allegiance from the old lord of tradition to the new Lord that appeared before him. With the words, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Paul showed that he was willing to surrender everything he held dear and allow the Lord to decide for him. Love of the Lord and not love of tradition then became the ruling and motivating power of his life:

The apostle Paul went directly contrary to the will of God before his conversion. His powers were employed in the cause and work of the enemy of God and man; but when light from Heaven shone about him, and the voice of Jesus was heard saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," he inquired, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Love for Jesus became the ruling power in his life, and when there was work to be done for the Lord, no danger could intimidate him, no opposition hinder, no threats appall, no difficulties dishearten, no power cause him to swerve from the path appointed of God.¹³

After his own conversion, Paul wrote on how one's commitment to the Lord relates to the law of tradition. It would be a simple matter if the Pharisee Saul completely abandoned his former understanding and practices. In fact, the Apostle Paul showed both a continuity and discontinuity with elements of the law and how this practically applies to the urban church today.

Faith the End of Circumcision

In trying to overcome the tradition of circumcision, Paul faced an almost insurmountable mountain of explicit teaching from the Old Testament. After all, the Judaizers who were trying to strongly defend the practice of circumcision, seemed to have solid Scriptural support:

- The miracle birth of Isaac came as a direct result of the patriarch Abraham being circumcised under the revelation of the Lord.
- The son of the great leader Moses was circumcised on the way to Egypt as a result of meeting with a heavenly messenger (Exodus 4:24-26).
- The Levitical law specifically commanded that sons be circumcised on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:3).
- Ezekial had written that no uncircumcised foreigner could enter the sanctuary (Ezekial 44:9).

The rabbis of the Intertestamental period had taught that circumcision:

had a spiritual effect but was necessarily a bodily sign representing the covenant, admitting to every aspect of the Jewish religion, and assuring a share in future salvation. Without it one was “cut off” from the community and hence from God because the covenant was broken (Genesis 17:14).¹⁴

Some rabbis even felt that circumcision was more important than the Sabbath commandment:

The most notable rite that superseded the Sabbath was circumcision, which normally had to take place the eighth day after birth. R. Rose the Galilean says: “Great is circumcision, for it sets aside the Sabbath, which is very important and the profanation of which is punishable by extinction.”¹⁵

The Judaizers could also argue that Jesus Himself had been circumcised (accompanied by the prophetic pronouncements of Simeon and Anna) and had never directly spoke one word against its practice. Furthermore, the Jerusalem Council, when considering if Gentile Christians should be circumcised, could not come up with a explicit Scriptural text but inferred their judgment from Amos 9:11-12. As F. F. Bruce points out, the Judaizers Paul was dealing with, “would be satisfied with nothing less than verbatim chapter-and-verse authority, and this was not forthcoming.”¹⁶

Finally, it is clear that Paul not only knew of the arguments surrounding circumcision, put had practiced the very things the Judaizers were teaching before his conversion. For Paul himself had “confidence in the flesh” before he met Christ on the Road to Damascus:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless (Philippians 3:4-6).

At this point a comparison needs to be made between the problem Paul faced with the rite of circumcision and many of the traditions found in the church today such as the time of worship, pulpit furniture, the color of the carpet, church location, existence and a host of other items.

COMPARING CIRCUMCISION WITH TODAY’S TRADITIONS

Circumcision	Local Church Tradition Today
Grounded in the Old Testament.	Often no direct Scriptural counsel.
Connected to the historical Abraham.	Often a hazy historical connection.

Practiced for over 1800 years.	Practiced for 5 to 150 years.
Seen as a non-negotiable item.	Often seen as a non-negotiable item.
Became a critical issue.	Can become a critical issue.

Needless to say, the rite of circumcision was more deeply rooted in both Scripture and history than most traditions today. That is what made it that much more difficult to change. However, if Paul was successful in changing the long-standing rite of circumcision, then there is hope that the church can change today. But just how did Paul change the rite of circumcision and why was it of such importance?

1) Circumcision did not enhance my faith in God: The first argument Paul might have used is that his own former reliance upon a purely external and legalistic religion had not worked. Throughout the letters of Paul, he consistently underscores the fact that the law alone is not able to atone for past sins, justify a person before a Holy God, lead to a perfection of life or confidence in the judgment. Paul tells us that if there ever was anyone who could have attained righteousness based on pedigree and strict adherence he was exhibit A.

Despite the very best effort a human could put forth, his mind was not at peace, for the Lord had read his inner struggle: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). His own narrow way was changed forever by the infinite mercy of the Lord that loved the proud Pharisee while he was yet a sinner (cf. Romans 5:8).

Paul could testify from personal experience that “a person is justified not by the works of the law [like circumcision] but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Galations 2:16). Having a dynamic faith in Christ means that the old lords of self and tradition has been “crucified with Christ” so that “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galations 2:19-20).

“I want to know Christ” (Phillipians 3:10). When the Sun of Righteousness had arisen with startling brilliance upon Saul, all that was dear in a faithless past was now considered worthless. In light of Christ’s forgiving love towards the one who had persecuted Him (Acts 9:4) his confidence in a mere outward compliance to the law and human tradition was broken.

2) Circumcision did not enhance your faith in God: Paul desired to safeguard the new believers from submitting to the rite of circumcision and thus abandon their original salvation

which had been by sole fide and evidenced by the Holy Spirit. He reminded the Galation believers of how they had received the life of faith:

Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham (Galations 3:5-7).

Paul wanted to ensure that the Gentile believers would not slip into the same trap he had fallen before his conversion. The very confidence that Israel had put in the flesh as biological descendants of Abraham was shattered by the fact that all flesh, Gentile (Romans 1) and Jew (Romans 2) have come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Paul demonstrated that the universal lordship of sin extended also to the Jews who had been given the privilege of knowing the law. Only through surrendering to the Lord could the old lord of sin and self-righteousness be broken.

3) Circumcision had not begun Abraham's faith in God: The Judaizers argued that circumcision was needed because Abraham had been circumcised as an entrance into covenant relationship with God. However, Paul argued that Abraham had actually been justified by faith before he was circumcised (Romans 4:10). Abraham therefore not only becomes the model Jew who centers his life around that special covenant relationship, but also the model Gentile who responds by faith to the call of the Lord to follow Him.

In full consciousness of his God-given authority and the illumination of the Old Testament Scriptures which the revelation of Christ had given him Paul could proclaim with the utmost confidence that the gospel he preached was the standard by which all others should be judged. We are to have faith in the Lord and not tradition. When we have given ourselves to be controlled by Christ we will not be so earnest to control, but to inspire others with a like faith.

Summary

Because of tradition, churches have often lost their relevancy and sense of purpose. All the work of the church must inform and inspire faith which leads to an entire dependence on the Lordship of Christ. Only in this way will the church be able to proclaim its mission in a relevant way to a rebellious world.

Just as Paul's meeting of the Lord put tradition in its rightful place, the church of today needs to surrender itself to God if it expects the Lord and not tradition to bear sway in its individual and corporate worship and mission. It is critical to realize that the struggle to

overcome the barrier of tradition is primarily a spiritual struggle that can only be won when the words, “Lord, what would you have me to do” (Acts 22:10) come from the inner heart of a believer.

Notwithstanding the lack of explicit biblical evidence to do away with circumcision, Paul showed the correct theological understanding of the Old Testament is, “not a rationalistic method or principle, be it literalism or allegorism, but Christ Jesus, the Son of God, as revealed in the New Testament.”¹⁷ Just as Christ was the “end” of the law, faith in Christ was the inherent role of circumcision. The external form of tradition is never to supersede the internal spiritual dynamic of faith and surrender. Tradition should never be made lord, but rather a servant to bring faith to the Lord.

Those who are holding on to tradition must be willing to lay it on the altar of sacrifice whereas those who want to introduce change must show love and sound judgment. To paraphrase Paul: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision [tradition] nor uncircumcision [untradition] counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Galations 5:6). Only through the miracle of true conversion can the destructive Roundup be changed into the life-giving Miracle-Gro.

Endnotes

1. Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel*, (Tubigen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984), page 41.
2. Ibid., page 47.
3. Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul*, (London: SCM Press, 1991), page 83.
4. Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel*, page 47.
5. Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul*, page 65.
6. Ibid., page 84.
7. Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel*, page 46.
8. Carl George, and Robert E. Logan, *Leading and Managing Your Church*, (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming, 1987), page 159.
9. Ibid., page 160.

10. Ibid., page 160.
11. Louis Berkhof, *Paul the Missionary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), page 17.
12. Timothy J. Ralston, "The Theological Significance of Paul's Conversion," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 1990, 147:198-215.
13. Ellen G. White, "*The Rejection of Saul*," *Signs of the Times* 6(1), 1888.
14. M.E. Glasswell, "*New Wine in Old Wineskins*." *Expository Times*, 1974, 85:328-332.
15. Robert M. Johnston, "The Rabbinic Sabbath," *In The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Kenneth A. Strand, ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), page 75.
16. Frederic F. Bruce, "Galation Problems," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 1972, 54:264-284.
17. Hans LaRondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism*, (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1979), page 19.