

Paul Was a Religious Extremist Too

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As an evangelical theologian, I affirm that the ‘evangel’, God’s gospel of love and forgiveness, is the sole message of hope for this world. Because God loves this world, we can hope to overcome not only individual but also structural hatred. Through the gospel, not only private enemies but even opposing groups and warlords can achieve reconciliation and justice.

The New Testament demonstrates this by highlighting the conversion of one of the leading religious extremists in first-century Jerusalem. We can easily forget that Paul’s conversion involved not just a personal transformation but a major shift in his view of the relationship between religion and violence.

Before his conversion, Paul believed it was God’s will for him to persecute followers of Jesus with the power of the state and of his religious communion, and even to stone them. Thus he took part in the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, who (like his master Jesus Christ) said, ‘Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they do’ (Acts 7:60).

After his conversion, Paul viewed his former violent behaviour as the clearest expression of his sinful heart and acts (Gal 1:1–3; Phil 3:4–9; 1 Tim 1:13). Instead of killing others, he now was willing to become a martyr for his faith—as he eventually did—without using force to defend himself. His only defence was his personal witness to the gospel.

Interestingly, *Paul never blamed his extremism on Jewish religion or theology, or on his Jewish upbringing or affiliation; rather, he blamed it on his own sinful heart.* He had committed the greatest sin possible and therefore was the first among all sinners (1 Tim 1:15), not worthy to become an apostle (1 Cor 15:9). Paul explained that he had misunderstood God before his conversion and that he had misused and put to shame the name of God as a Jew. He said it was not the Jewish faith but his own heart that made him an extremist and murderer.

Moreover, Paul did not say that as a Christian he would automatically become a peaceful, nice guy. Instead, he reminded his readers again and again that he had left religious extremism behind only by the grace of God and that only the same grace could continuously keep God’s love in his heart. ‘So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!’ (1 Cor 10:12). Paul knew that danger for the church comes more from our sinful heart than from the outside, and that out of the midst of church leadership come wolves that could kill the sheep (Acts 20:29–31).

May we continue to respond to today’s religious extremists with love, for ‘God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God remains in Him’ (1 Jn 4:16).

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