

Divine Encounter and Total Transformation: A Theological Study of Saul's Conversion to Paul.

**Rose BULUS BOYT¹, Nanlir Kartim Napbut Ph. D^{2*}, Gershinen Paul Dajur Ph. D³,
Victor Rufus ADEPOJU Ph. D⁴**

¹ LAWNA Theological Seminary Jos.

^{2*,4} Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary Abeokuta.

³ St. Francis of Asisi College of Theology Wusasa.

*** Correspondence:** Nanlir Kartim Napbut Ph. D

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ABSTRACT: The conversion of Saul of Tarsus, later known as the Apostle Paul, stands as one of the most profound illustrations of divine encounter and radical transformation in Christian theology. This study examines the theological significance of Saul's Damascus road experience (Acts 9:1–19; 22:3–16; 26:9–18) as a paradigm of how an authentic encounter with Christ reshapes identity, mission, and worldview. Before his encounter, Saul was a zealous Pharisee, actively persecuting the followers of “the Way.” Yet, through a dramatic and sovereign intervention of Christ, his life was redirected toward the proclamation of the gospel he once opposed. The paper highlights three interrelated theological dimensions: first, the sovereign initiative of God in Christ who interrupts human rebellion; second, the transformative power of divine grace that reconstitutes the sinner into a servant; and third, the missional consequence of encounter, as seen in Paul's lifelong commitment to the Gentile mission. This study argues that divine encounter is not merely a private spiritual event but a total reorientation of life, values, and purpose under the lordship of Christ. By

situating Paul's conversion within the broader biblical and theological framework of salvation and mission, the paper underscores that genuine encounter with Christ necessarily manifests in holistic transformation—personal, communal, and missional.

Keywords: *Christ, Conversion, Divine Encounter, Paul, Transformation*

INTRODUCTION

The story of Saul's conversion to Paul remains one of the most compelling narratives in the Christian tradition, illustrating the transformative power of divine encounter. Found primarily in Acts 9:1–19, with complementary accounts in Acts 22:3–16 and 26:9–18, the Damascus road experience marks not only a personal turning point but also a theological milestone in the history of the early Church. Saul, once a vehement persecutor of Christians, encountered the risen Christ in a vision that radically altered his life trajectory and redefined his identity, mission, and theology (Bruce 72). This event demonstrates that an authentic encounter with Christ does not leave an individual unchanged; rather, it manifests in a comprehensive transformation of character, purpose, and worldview.

Theologically, Saul's transformation into Paul is significant for several reasons. First, it illustrates the sovereignty of divine grace, whereby God initiates salvation even when human beings are resistant or hostile (Stendahl 44). Second, it highlights the power of Christ's revelation to overturn entrenched religious convictions, redirecting them toward God's redemptive purposes (Wright 148). Third, it sets a paradigm for Christian discipleship and mission, showing that divine encounter is inseparably linked with vocational calling and witness (Gaventa 30). This study, therefore, explores Saul's conversion as a theological case study of divine encounter and total transformation, underscoring its enduring relevance for Christian life and ministry today.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

To provide a clear framework for this study, it is important to define key concepts that recur throughout the discussion. These include Divine Encounter, Conversion, Paul, Transformation, and Christ.

Divine Encounter

A divine encounter refers to an extraordinary, life-altering experience in which an individual encounters the presence, revelation, or call of God. In the biblical tradition, divine encounters often result in new missions, revelations, or radical changes in life direction, as seen in figures such as Moses (Exod. 3:1–12) and Isaiah (Isa. 6:1–8). Saul's Damascus road experience represents such an encounter, in which Christ revealed himself as the risen Lord, thereby reorienting Saul's perception of God and salvation (Dunn 101).

Conversion

Conversion in Christian theology involves a turning from sin and self toward God, marked by repentance, faith, and transformation of life. It is not merely intellectual assent but a comprehensive change of allegiance and identity (Gaventa 20). Saul's conversion exemplifies this, as he shifted from persecutor of the Church to its most zealous apostle. Scholars emphasize that Paul's conversion was both personal and vocational, uniting inward renewal with outward mission (Wright 142).

Paul

Formerly Saul of Tarsus, Paul became one of the most influential figures in early Christianity. A Pharisee by training (Phil. 3:5), Paul's radical transformation after his divine encounter equipped him to articulate the gospel in ways that bridged Jewish tradition and Gentile mission (Bruce 65). His letters, which form a substantial portion of the New Testament, remain foundational to Christian theology, particularly regarding grace, justification, and mission.

Transformation

Transformation refers to the holistic change in character, worldview, and purpose brought about by divine grace. In Pauline theology, transformation is not superficial but involves being made new in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Saul's transformation illustrates how divine encounter reshapes not only personal identity but also communal responsibility and missional engagement (Sanders 49).

Christ

Christ, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Messiah, refers to Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God and Savior in Christian faith. The risen Christ who confronted Saul on the Damascus road revealed himself as Lord, thereby affirming the centrality of Christ in the work of salvation (Barclay 73). It was this encounter that grounded Paul's apostolic mission and theology, making Christ both the content and goal of his ministry.

Theoretical Framework

The study of Saul's conversion to Paul as a theological paradigm of divine encounter and transformation requires grounding in interpretive frameworks that integrate biblical theology, conversion theory, and Pauline studies. This framework situates the research within three interrelated perspectives.

1. Biblical Theology

Biblical theology emphasizes God's redemptive acts in history and their culmination in Christ. Within this framework, Saul's conversion is not an isolated personal event but part of God's unfolding salvific plan. Scholars such as James D. G. Dunn argue that Paul's encounter with Christ reoriented his reading of Scripture and covenant identity around the risen Messiah (Dunn 83). Thus, biblical theology frames the Damascus road as a divine intervention that fulfills the promises of Israel while extending salvation universally.

2. Conversion Theory

Conversion theory, as articulated in theological and sociological studies, underscores the multidimensional nature of conversion: cognitive, moral, relational, and vocational. Beverly Gaventa highlights that conversion in the New Testament is not simply an inward spiritual change but also a reconfiguration of community and mission (25). Applying this framework, Saul's transformation is seen as both a personal renewal and a missional commissioning, where divine encounter reshaped his worldview, loyalties, and purpose.

3. Pauline Theology

Pauline theology offers a lens through which Saul's transformation can be understood as paradigmatic for Christian experience. According to N. T. Wright, Paul's conversion inaugurated a new vision of God's kingdom, characterized by justification through faith and the inclusion of Gentiles (Wright 150). Krister Stendahl further emphasizes that Paul's Damascus experience was not merely about guilt and forgiveness but a vocational call to apostleship among the nations (Stendahl 45). This framework highlights transformation as both soteriological and missional.

Taken together, these perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for this study. By viewing Saul's conversion through the lenses of biblical theology, conversion theory, and Pauline theology, the study underscores that divine encounter is inseparable from transformation and mission, making Paul's experience a theological model for Christian life and ministry.

Methodology

This study adopts a multidisciplinary theological approach that combines biblical exegesis, historical-contextual analysis, and systematic reflection to examine Saul's conversion as a paradigm of divine encounter and transformation.

1. Biblical-Exegetical Method

The primary method is biblical exegesis, focusing on the three canonical accounts of Saul's Damascus road experience (Acts 9:1–19; 22:3–16; 26:9–18) and Pauline reflections on transformation (e.g., Gal. 1:11–17; 2 Cor. 5:17). The exegetical approach seeks to analyze the narrative structure, theological themes, and Christological emphasis of the texts. As Richard Bauckham observes, New Testament texts should be read as theological witnesses to God's redemptive action in Christ rather than merely historical records (Bauckham 27). This ensures that the study draws out the theological depth of Saul's encounter with the risen Christ.

2. Historical-Contextual Method

The study also employs historical-contextual analysis to situate Saul within his Jewish Pharisaic background and the socio-political realities of the early Church.

Understanding Saul's zeal for the law and his opposition to the early Christian movement illuminates the radical nature of his transformation (Bruce 65). This method provides insight into how divine encounter disrupts cultural, religious, and personal frameworks, reorienting them toward God's salvific plan.

3. Systematic-Theological Reflection

In addition, systematic theology is utilized to interpret the significance of Saul's conversion for doctrines of grace, salvation, and mission. N. T. Wright emphasizes that Paul's theology cannot be separated from his encounter with Christ, as it became the foundation for his understanding of justification, reconciliation, and new creation (Wright 143). This method ensures that the study moves beyond historical description to theological reflection that speaks to contemporary Christian life and ministry.

4. Theological-Contextual Relevance

Finally, the study employs a contextual theological lens, recognizing that the narrative of Saul's conversion resonates beyond the first century. As Kwame Bediako argues, biblical encounters with God must be interpreted within diverse cultural and historical contexts to remain relevant for the global church (Bediako 89). Thus, the methodology bridges the ancient biblical narrative with present-day theological application, particularly in African Christianity, where themes of divine encounter and transformation are central to faith and witness.

Through these combined methods, the study provides a comprehensive theological examination of Saul's conversion, underscoring its enduring significance as a model of divine encounter that leads to total transformation.

Theological Analysis and Discussion

The conversion of Saul to Paul is not merely a personal religious experience but a theological event that reveals God's sovereign grace, Christ's lordship, and the transformative nature of divine encounter. Three key theological themes emerge from the Damascus road narrative: divine initiative, transforming grace, and missional vocation.

1. Divine Initiative

The Damascus road event underscores that salvation is ultimately God's initiative rather than human pursuit. Saul was not seeking Christ; rather, he was actively opposing Him by persecuting the Church (Acts 9:1–2). Yet Christ intervened decisively, confronting Saul with the question, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). This illustrates that divine encounter often disrupts human agendas and redirects them toward God's purposes. As Dunn argues, Paul's conversion was “a radical reorientation initiated by God's revelation of His Son” (Dunn 87). The theological significance lies in the affirmation that grace precedes human response, confirming that God takes the first step in reconciliation (Rom. 5:8).

2. Transforming Grace

Saul's encounter with Christ resulted in a profound inner and outer transformation. He who once “breathed threats and murder” (Acts 9:1) became an instrument of the gospel. Paul later reflected on this transformation, declaring, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). The transformation was not limited to personal morality but encompassed his worldview, theology, and mission. As Sanders notes, Paul's theology of grace emerged directly from his own experience of being forgiven and called despite his opposition to Christ (Sanders 51). Transformation through grace, therefore, is comprehensive—affecting identity, values, and purpose.

3. Missional Vocation

A central dimension of Saul's transformation was his commissioning as apostle to the Gentiles. In Acts 9:15, the Lord tells Ananias, “This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.” Saul's encounter was thus inseparable from mission; divine encounter always propels believers into service. Stendahl highlights that Paul's Damascus experience was more of a vocational call than an inward conversion of conscience, emphasizing mission over personal piety (Stendahl 46). This theological insight shifts the focus from individual spirituality to communal responsibility in advancing God's kingdom.

4. Christ-Centered Transformation

At the heart of Saul's encounter was the revelation of Jesus as the risen Lord. The words, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5), redefined Saul's understanding of God, Torah, and community. Barclay observes that Paul's theology of Christ as the gift of God was birthed out of this moment, in which Christ's self-disclosure became the foundation of his faith and mission (Barclay 74). Thus, Saul's transformation illustrates that authentic Christian change is Christ-centered and Christ-driven.

5. Implications for Christian Life and Ministry

Theologically, Saul's experience demonstrates that divine encounter leads to holistic transformation—personal, communal, and missional. For contemporary Christianity, especially within African contexts, this narrative speaks powerfully to the need for authentic experiences of Christ that break cycles of violence, corruption, and despair. As Bediako argues, encounters with Christ must be understood not only as spiritual renewal but also as catalysts for cultural and social transformation (Bediako 93). Paul's transformation is, therefore, a model for believers and communities who seek renewal through Christ's presence and power.

Recommendations and Implications

The theological study of Saul's conversion provides insights not only for biblical scholarship but also for Christian spirituality, ministry, and mission in contemporary contexts. Three major recommendations emerge.

1. Emphasizing the Centrality of Divine Encounter

Churches and theological institutions should stress that genuine transformation arises from an authentic encounter with the risen Christ. This encounter may not always be as dramatic as Paul's Damascus road experience, but it is essential for spiritual renewal and effective ministry.

2. Encouraging Holistic Transformation

Saul's transformation was not limited to belief but encompassed character, worldview, and mission. Contemporary Christian communities are called to embrace

transformation that addresses personal holiness, social justice, and cultural engagement. In contexts like Africa, where corruption and socio-political crises abound, divine encounter must translate into ethical living and communal renewal

3. Integrating Mission with Personal Renewal

The Damascus narrative shows that transformation naturally issues in mission. Believers today must recognize that divine encounter is not for private benefit alone but for the service of others. Paul's transformation is a reminder that every Christian is called to witness in word and deed.

By applying these lessons, the Church can embody the reality that divine encounter with Christ still leads to radical transformation, equipping believers for faithful discipleship and mission in today's world.

Conclusion

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus into Paul the apostle remains one of the most significant events in Christian history and theology. As this study has shown, the Damascus road encounter was not a mere psychological or moral change but a divinely initiated transformation that redefined Saul's identity, mission, and theology. The narrative demonstrates that authentic divine encounter manifests in total transformation: from hostility to faith, from persecutor to preacher, and from self-centered zeal to Christ-centered mission.

Three theological truths stand out. First, divine initiative underscores that salvation is an act of God's sovereign grace rather than human effort. Second, transformation through grace is holistic, reshaping the believer's character, worldview, and vocation. Third, divine encounter is inseparably tied to mission, as Paul's call to be an apostle to the Gentiles illustrates. These themes affirm that Christian discipleship is rooted in encounter with Christ and expressed in service to others.

For contemporary Christianity, particularly within African contexts, Paul's transformation offers a paradigm of how divine encounter challenges cultural, religious, and social structures while fostering renewal. It calls the Church to emphasize authentic experiences of Christ that produce ethical living, communal

responsibility, and missional commitment. Ultimately, Saul's transformation into Paul is a living testimony that no life is beyond the reach of Christ's grace and that every encounter with Him carries the potential for radical, holistic, and enduring change.

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