

The Peril of Fanaticism
Acts 9:1-9

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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?" Acts 9:3-4

The story of Paul's conversion along the Damascus Road is one of the celebrated stories of the New Testament. Our familiarity with this story may lead us to miss one significant fact about it. That fact is this. Paul was already a deeply religious man when this story took place. He was not converted along the Damascus Road from unbelief to belief, or from atheism to faith, or even from one religion to another. Paul was already deeply religious but he was a fanatic and his fanaticism was destroying lives. The Risen Christ appeared to him along the Damascus Road to rid Paul of his destructive fanaticism and replace it with a higher and more humble devotion.

Fanatical religion

Here we confront the idea that a person can be deeply religious, even within Christianity, and still be far from God. Swiss theologian Karl Barth used self-deprecating humor to warn people who are sure they and they alone have the final answer on all questions related to religion. One hundred years ago Barth published what was to become a world famous and highly influential commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans. Barth wrote an inscription in his own copy of his book. The inscription read, "Karl Barth, to his dear Karl Barth, 1922." And then he added this quotation from Martin Luther: "If you feel or imagine that you are right and suppose that your book, teaching, or writing is a great achievement . . . then . . . feel your ears. If you are doing it properly, you will find that you have a splendid pair of big. Long, shaggy assess' ears"¹ Barth believed that we lose our understanding of the gospel if we claim to have too perfect an understanding of it.² Later in his life he imagined that the angels would laugh at him at his death coming to heaven pushing his wheelbarrow full of the multi-volume *Church Dogmatics* he spent a career writing from his study in Basel. The angels would laugh at old Karl, thinking he had gotten it right.³

That was Barth's self-deprecating sense of humor. Paul, starting out for Damascus that day, had no sense of humor. He was instead supremely convinced he was supremely right and that anyone who disagreed with him was supremely wrong. He was a trained Pharisee, a member of the strictest sect (Acts 26:5). He knew his scriptures inside and out. He had been taught by

¹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. by John Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 121.

² Busch, p. 120.

³ Donald K. McKim, "The Witness of the Holy Spirit Today: A Review of Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*," paper presented before The Karl Barth Society, Midwest Chapter, April 30, 1982, at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. McKim cites Karl Barth, *Antwort* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag AG, 1956), p. 895. Translated in Robert McAfee Brown's "Introduction" to George Casalis, *Portrait of Karl Barth* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), p. 3.

Gamaliel, one of the best (Acts 22:3). In time he became so convinced that he was so right that those who disagreed with him deserved punishment. He had them thrown into prison. He helped condemn some to death (Acts 26:9-11). Before he set out on the Damascus Road Paul was a fanatic who imposed his faith on others in ways harmful and destructive.

Along the Damascus Road and afterward the Lord Christ helped Paul to see he did not have all the answers he thought he had. And Paul became a different person because of it. He softened. He became kinder. He became humbler. Instead of being convinced he knew it all, he sought to know more (Phil. 3:10). Instead of breathing threats against others, he pressed on toward a goal of self-improvement (Phil. 3:12). He maintained his devotion but he lost his fanaticism, and that brought him to a faith and life that Christ could use.

This much of Paul's story yields a principle worth taking to heart. The principle is this. Something wonderfully good – something like religion – can become dreadfully bad if it succumbs to the pull of fanaticism. Let's take this principle and apply it to other areas of life where we are wise to guard against the peril of fanaticism.

Fanatical patriotism

Apply the principle to patriotism. Love for country is marvelous. Without it the United States would not be anywhere on the world stage. My family attended the Memorial Day festivities in my hometown every year when I was a boy. I think I began to learn patriotism there. My brother and I marched in the parade some years. We both wore our poppies, purchased from Mabel Schultz and May Chesak who sat at a card table outside Purdom's grocery store. Most vivid to me, though, and what I remember as the most moving, is seeing two old men who stood proudly and who were featured in the program every year. Harry Weltzein and Pat Williams were Huntley's living veterans of WWI. I marveled at them. They were part of history. I did not know what it was, but I knew deep in my heart they had done something important that meant something. And I came to believe that love for country matters. Devotion to our nation's highest ideals matters. Patriotism is a supremely good thing.

And yet how destructive patriotism can be when it becomes fanatical. The refusal to be humble about our country, to be blindly insistent upon its exceptionalism to the point of thinking our country has nothing to learn, nothing to confess, and nothing to admire in another nation is a perilous path to be on. "My country right or wrong" may be one thing; "my country never wrong" is quite another. There is hope in patriotism, but not if we are fanatics about it.

Fanatical partisanship

Or apply the principle we learned along the Damascus Road to partisan politics. The two-party system is beneficial to our country, I believe. There are even third parties that contribute to the national conversation from time to time. We are helped when we have more than one point of view to draw upon. Each party has its own emphasis and both are needed, just as a bird needs two wings to fly. Partisan politics in this sense is a good thing.

And yet how destructive partisanship can be when it becomes fanatical. A party becomes fanatical when it ceases to have contributing to the conversation as its aim and focuses instead on decimating the other party. Under the rules of fanatical partisanship disparaging the other party is

more important than articulating a point of view. There is nothing constructive in that. There is hope to be found in spirited debate with the other side but not if we are fanatics about our side.

Fanatical love of freedom

Apply our Damascus Road principle to one more area of life today: the love of freedom. No one within the sound of my voice across cyberspace would deny, I think, the beauty and value of freedom. There is something in the human spirit that longs for freedom the way a dog tugs at its leash. There is real worth in repeated in every age Patrick Henry's famous cry, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Well, maybe "Give me liberty!" I suppose every playground across America has at one point been the scene where someone shouted the supposedly irrefutable retort, "It's a free country! I can do what I want!" We cherish our freedom and no one wishes it taken away.

And yet how destructive love of liberty can be when we become fanatics about it. Liberty unrestrained is wholly detrimental to society. The COVID crisis is bearing that out. States and businesses and churches and individuals are free to lift and limit the restrictions they find too confining. But they are not free to have the virus abide by their personal preferences. Fanatical freedom thinks it can do whatever it wants and be free of the consequences, too. But the world is not set up that way. There is hope in freedom, to be sure, but not when we are fanatics about it.

Well, we have come some distance away from the story of Paul's conversion along the Damascus Road. But that story has yielded up for us a helpful caution as to the perils of fanaticism in any field. The good carried to the extreme can become unbalanced and in its imbalanced form it can be destructive. So! Think as you will. But always feel your ears.