

Colleagues—the following has some unusual and provocative material. It is worth the read. Please let me know what you think. Pastor Bill

**TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
IHOP BIBLE STUDY**

8 Topic: “” -- with commentary

Acts 9:1 – 19a, “Saul’s Conversion;” Acts 9: 19b – 31, “Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem.”

The purpose of the Book of Acts is to record the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Vision and Ministry of Peter and Paul. **Today’s study is the 8th of 20 lessons.**

A contextual statement:

Interestingly, *The Interpreter’s Bible* makes the following observation. In the book of Acts, “The Lord is not returned, but in the meantime the word of God is being carried on by the church. The Gentile mission is itself the eschatological action of God.” (*The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1971. p. 730.)

This I want to affirm as our perspective. **We will study this book from the perspective of the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit.** This puts us out on the cusp of a deep and foreboding spiritual hole that is eternally deep. The Holy Spirit is that intuited presence within us that urges us to “Jump.” “Jump!” To take this leap of faith means to surrender ourselves to the eternal deeps. The discovery, to which I can personally testify, is that this deep, dark, mysterious hole is the place where God lives within us. As we lose control of everything— our-selves, our relationships to neighbor and to God— then we can discover that God really does sustain us. But the experience is like falling, and it is not entirely comfortable. But it works.

Read the assigned scripture.

For those following the Acts chart, this is the first session in the larger context of “Peter’s Vision and Work Moving Out Into The Greek/Gentile World.” Happy beginnings.

PLEASE REMEMBER: Gut Trip Analysis means to take seriously your own experience. When the instruction is to use Gut Trip Analysis, this means to keep asking yourself, what is the human experience that is being presented here in scripture. Push yourself hard to think this way. This is the fundamental of using Gut Trip Analysis.

I. Acts 9:1 – 19a, “Saul’s Conversion”

Caveat: This is one of the most retold portions of Christian scripture. The danger is to assume we know what took place here (Head Trip Analysis) rather than subject the event to Gut Trip Analysis. In light of Gut Trip Analysis, it is important to (again) say that this is not a super natural event. Rather, it is a deeply spiritual event that calls for our serious attention. At the outset, set aside your disbelief in order to examine the significance of what is happening here.

WS: A CONVERSATION ABOUT SUPERNATURALISM: The IHOP Bible Study began today’s session with a serious conversation about the place of supernaturalism and its role in the Book of Acts. The following is my analysis of why supernaturalism does not provide a sufficient analysis on how the Holy Spirit works

(Head Trip Analysis). The better analysis tool is to understand the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of a deeply spiritual happening (Gut Trip Analysis).

ONE REALITY: Every one on earth stands before the same reality. We all look at this reality through different sets of eyes or experiences; but it is still the same reality.

To believe that this reality is best understood from the perspective of parallel universes—one heavenly and one earthly—is to deny that reality is universal and united. Supernaturalism assumes two realities. We do not live in two realities. We live in the Uni-verse of one reality.

However, it is important to understand that there are two perspectives to view our universe of one reality. One perspective is natural and human. The second perspective is spiritual. Marcus Borg is helpful to us here. He describes how there are "Thin Places" in our human/natural experience through which we get insights into the spiritual nature of our universal reality. For instance, the Incarnation is one such "thin place." The birth of Jesus took place in the womb of a woman (natural and human). However, what is perceived in this event is that the birth of Jesus carries with it a spiritual experience. There are some who embrace the notion that the entire birth story is just that, a story to freight the meaning of God (the spiritual) becoming human (the natural).

These miraculous events become illustrations for us and for our own human experiences. When we have the eyes to see the thin places, then we become aware of the spiritual dimension of our experience of universal reality.

While Borg embraces that thin places are special places for revelation, I'd rather embrace the notion that the spiritual dimension of reality is always with us and that we are blind to it. It is not something special. When we are awakened we can see that the spiritual dimension is as evident as nature itself is evident. Consequently, whenever you have an experience, or just to make a decision, the experience and/or the decision is a revelation of God's presence among us.

To illustrate: I serve as a volunteer chaplain at the Salina County Jail. Recently I visited a 30-something women for the third time. She confessed to me that she considered herself unforgiven because of the horrible things she has done to others, or cause others to do to her.

I spoke to her about how our purpose of being human is to fulfill God's intended purpose of living At-One with neighbor, self and finally with Perfect At-One-Ment itself (God.) In this way we fulfill the new commandment of Jesus. However, our human nature (natural) convinces us of self-depreciation which is the antithesis of At-One-Ment.

Next, we rehearsed that God already has forgotten her actions, as well as forgiven them. If this is our Christian affirmation, then why does she want to continue to carry around this sense of unforgiveness? The reward for this position is to be alienated from herself, from her neighbor and finally, from God.

As we talked, this woman experienced the revelation of her own self-worth

and the transformation of her features was quite striking.

For me, this woman had scales fall from her eyes. In this conversation, she was thrown off the horse of unforgiveness and experienced a profound transformation of her life. Was this a miracle? You bet! Was it supernatural? No. Did a heavenly God intervene against ordinary "reality?" No. Was this a deeply spiritual event? You bet.

It is from this perspective that the Book of Acts takes on profound meaning. To believe otherwise is to cheapen the spiritual reality of the Book of Acts.

A. Vss. 3 and 4.

First, find Damascus on the map.

WS: Damascus is in Syria on a parallel between east of the seaport town of Sidon. Damascus lies about 100 kilometers east of the seacoast. It is one of the 10 great cities in the Roman Empire. It is a city of unorthodox Jews, and Paul was on his way to secure their permission to arrest those among them who were Christians.

Answer the following: If you were describing an event with the words, "Suddenly a light from heaven flashed all around" me, what might you be describing?

WS: *The following is copied from **The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, page 740.***

D. The Conversion of Paul (9:1 – 31)

9:3 – 7. Paul's vision is presented in the form of ancient symbolism. The light from heaven signifies divine revelation, and the heavenly voice is reminiscent of the supernatural word heard in rabbinic debate (cf. Luke 3:22). The charge against Paul makes it evident that persecuting the church is the same as persecuting Christ (cf. Luke 10:16). In this account Paul seems to hear, but not see, the heavenly spokesman (cf. when his eyes were opened, vs. 8); his own writing asserts that he has "seen Jesus our Lord." (1 Cor. 9:1). The command that he go to the city to receive instruction conflicts with his own assertion that he did not receive his commission to preach from men (Gal. 1: 11- 16), and the information that his companions stood speechless is not in harmony with 26: 14. Similarly Luke's statement that these companions were hearing the voice is contradicted by his later declaration that they "did not hear the voice." (22:9). On the one hand he wants to present witnesses to the event; on the other he is anxious to interpret the vision as an experience of Paul.

9: 8 – 9. Paul's blindness is probably to be viewed not as punishment, but as a result of the radiance of the vision (cf. 11:11). His failure to eat and drink may be interpreted either as penitent fasting or as the effect of the vision's impact. In general the Acts account focus on the externals of the conversion while Paul himself emphasizes the inward character of the experience. For him the conversion has 2 main elements: Christ appeared to him (1Cor. 15: 8); God called him to preach (Gal. 1:16).

Why might you be using this type of metaphor?

WS: The metaphor of "the flash of a heavenly light" describes a thin place. When deeply spiritual events happen to us, we must use the language at hand to explain what happened. This is why the Bible uses supernatural language, because their world view at the time explained, or made-sense, by adopting language forms that were in use at the time that were appropriate to their world view. To take these

metaphors literally is to destroy their spiritual depth. Even the supernatural language was used as a metaphor. It never was intended to be taken literally.

B. Vss. 9: The Bible never uses numbers willy-nilly. See what you can find out about the number 3.

WS: Alright, my confession time. I was hoping that a search of biblical numerology might prove enlightening. However, in the brief time I took to do the research, I struck out. However, like the number "7" and "40," the number "3" is used many times. In particular, Christians use this number to represent the Trinity.

C. The metaphor of "seeing" or "losing sight" plays a big part in this event. Make some assumptions about the use of sight as a spiritual tool.

WS: To push our Gut Trip Analysis of these words, it is necessary to remind ourselves that, like the author of *The Interpreter's Bible* made clear in the article above, these words are to be interpreted as metaphors used to explain a profound experience. As we view reality, we use two sets of eyes, or lenses. One lens represents the human or natural, (to use my metaphor) this represents the Human Desert. The other lens represents the spiritual dynamic, or what I call the Spiritual Oasis. Being blind is to be associated with the Human Desert. When scales fall from our eyes, we have the capacity to see reality from the perspective of our Spiritual Oasis.

II. Acts 9: 19b – 31, "Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem"

A. Vss. 19b and 20: Ground, for yourself, Saul's message that "Jesus is the Son of God." What does this mean in terms of your human experience?

WS: Using Gut Trip Analysis, the term "Son of God" can be associated through our Christology with Jesus the man. Jesus bears within himself the activity of The Christ. This is revealed to us in his complete surrender to God. Also, Jesus provides for us an example of how we are to live our lives in complete surrender to God. Jesus intentionally lived his life, and intentionally died his death to be a demonstration for us; so too can we live and die. The unmerited reward for such surrender is that as we become nothings so that God can become everything. In return, God blesses us by returning to us in a measure of 7 times. Try it. You might like it. The caveat is this: don't intend to receive anything, or be anything other than an instrument completely surrendered to God.

B. Vss. 22: If you were with Saul, how would you go about proving to the Jews living in Damascus that "Jesus is the Christ?" What would you say to them?

WS: Why make a difficult answer, when a simple one will do. The evidence is the early church that represents Jesus as the resurrected Christ. The church is considered to be The Body of Christ!

C. Vss. 23 – 24: This is one of the most unusual escapes described in the New Testament. It is a reminder of a similar event in the Old Testament. Do you remember what this event was? Describe why this escape was necessary for Saul.

WS: I'd hoped this would be a trick question. The answer is the experience of Rahab, in the book of Joshua. This event took place before the Battle of Jericho. The Israelites sent spies to get battle intelligence. They were discovered and hid in the apartment of Rahab, a prostitute. She lied on behalf of the spies, believing that the Israelites would win the battle, and she was hoping to spare herself and her family. Read all about it in Joshua 2.

D. Vss. 29: See what you can find out about the "Grecian Jews." Report it here.

WS: Essentially, this reports that the Grecian Jews were Hellenists, who were diaspora Jews that returned to settle in Jerusalem. Paul was a Hellenist having been born a Diaspora Jew. For the most part, the Hebraic Jews did not like the Diaspora Jews. Learn more at <http://www.wcg.org/lit/bible/acts/acts6.htm>

E. Vss. 30: Find on a biblical map the town of Caesarea and Tarsus. Learn what you can about these places, and speculate on why they were chosen for Saul's retreat.

WS: Caesarea is a seacoast town with an excellent port. It was named after the leader of the Roman occupation of Israel. Obviously, it was selected because Saul could book a cruise from this place cheaper than the ports further south. Tarsus is Saul's home town in Cilicia, or what today is in Turkey. Tarsus is very close to the country of Syria.

Alright, folks, talk to me.