Paul: The Pattern

The life of the apostle Paul is mesmerizing and inspiring. His radical transformation is well known in both Christian and secular history. This transformation he experienced becomes the theme of his life and many other of his sermons in Acts, and a frequent topic of his epistles. This transformation is often called his “road to Damascus” experience. He calls this experience "a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." His experience is prolific, but what is it describing? However we view Paul as a pattern, we can take it to an extreme. No person in modern Christendom has written part of the Bible, and very few have traveled so extensively in evangelistic journeys. I would add that not a single person in Christian history has probably been so Christ centric as Paul. Is this pattern conversion? Is it regeneration? Let's consider both the former life of Paul, as Saul, and what transpired on the road to Damascus to see how Paul is our pattern.

Former Life

“Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." -1 Timothy 1:13

Paul spoke of himself before this experience as being a “blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious." The view we get of Paul before Acts 9 is one of a Christ hating detractor of the truth. The description of Paul is that of a depraved man who was dead in trespasses and sins. We first see Paul in Acts 7 as Saul of Tarsus. He is introduced as being among the crowd that had stoned Stephen. He was gratified with the death Stephen (Acts 8:1).
His gratification is illustrated through viewing him holding the clothes of those who held false witness against Stephen (Acts 6:13, Acts 7:58). Furthermore, consider the description given by Stephen of the crowd of which Paul was in attendance, their reaction to Stephen's message, and the actions of the crowd that gratified Paul.

- Stephen addressed those that stoned him (Acts 7:51) as "stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears." I have met many stiffnecked Christians and old Baptists in my life, but this description says too much to just be stiffnecked regenerates. Stephen calls them uncircumcised in heart and ears. The New Testament circumcision of the heart is regeneration. Paul often used this analogy in his epistles (Col 2:11, Romans 2:29). Also, the complete inability to hear is an evidence of a wicked heart (John 8:43). Paul, at this point in his life, was numbered among those who were "stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears."

- Contrast the reaction of those in Acts chapter 7 to those in chapter 2. Those in the second chapter were pricked in the heart and gladly received the message (Acts 2:37,41). These men in chapter 7 were cut to the heart and gnashed on Stephen with their teeth (Acts 7:54). What made the difference? The preparation of the heart by the Holy Spirit in regeneration is what made the difference. Paul was collectively with the “they” that were cut to the heart.

- Paul was not only with those that had stoned Stephen, he also had acquired the authority to imprison Christians (Acts 9:1-2). He did all this while “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.” Is this a serious charge? In John 16:2-3, Jesus would qualify those who persecuted the disciples as not knowing the Father or himself. So yes, this is a very serious charge indeed. Jesus said that those who perpetually commit these atrocities have never been touched by God's sovereign grace. They are void of a vital union with God.
These three points manifest Paul's heart before he was on the road to Damascus. The description is not that of a man touched by grace. So we can immediately see that Paul was regenerated after Acts 9:2.

An objection may be raised from Galatians 1:15, “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:

" (John 3:6)

Paul, like all other humans, was shaped in sin and conceived in iniquity (Psalms 51:5). Being called by God's grace separated Paul from his natural state inherited through his parents.

Consider that Romans 7 describes a time in Paul's adult life where he was alive without the law (Romans 7:9). Paul was raised in an environment fully involved with the Mosaic law and Jewish traditions. Paul being alive without the law would only make sense if there was a time when the true meaning, and weight of the law was not imputed to Paul's mind. Also, we know that this was past his infancy because the law itself worked concupiscence in him (Romans 7:8). Only someone fully cognizant of the contents of the law could consciously lust to break it. That is not to say that infants are not under sin, but the knowledge of sin is given through the law (Romans 7:7).

When Paul was given spiritual life the true sense of the commandment came and slew Paul in his conscience (Romans 7:9-11). Truly, there was a time in Paul's adult life where he was dead in trespasses and sins. And as we have previously seen, he continued in this state until at least after Acts 9:2.

Our Pattern
First, I would like to remind the reader that regeneration and conversion are not synonymous. Regeneration is a one time instantaneous and immediate event. Conversion is a daily and lifetime activity that happens after regeneration. Regeneration is done solely by the sovereign voice of the Son of God. While conversion is built on the foundation of the sovereign working of God in regeneration, it is still conditioned upon a person's obedience. Regeneration is identical for all children of God. Conversion comes with great varying degrees. So is this example referring to regeneration or conversion? Or both?

I would contend that the pattern given to us is that of regeneration and not conversion. Some may object to this because the panoramic view of chapter 9 also details the full conversion of Paul and not just regeneration. Or they may object because their specific story does not seem to fully fit every part of Paul's pattern of regeneration. Taking this pattern to an extreme can be problematic for any Bible interpreter. Some may have objections to it being regeneration, yet the same problems would exist if the objection was used in reference to conversion. If someone views Paul's actions as an absolute pattern referring to conversion, whether in Acts 9 or otherwise, then I would argue that there are only very few, if any, that are ever converted. Do we have to become apostles and go on far reaching evangelistic journeys in order to fit that pattern? Do we have to write New Testament cannon to be converted? Of course not. Like the parables that Jesus used, it is the overall theme, or high points, and not all of the specific mechanics of the story that makes the parallel.

How then was was Paul a pattern of regeneration? Let's now consider the three main points:

1. Paul was dead in sins before Christ appeared to him. Paul did not seek Christ or salvation. Paul did not accept salvation or Christ, but instead was breathing out threats to all Christians. Apart from God's grace, thus are we.

2. Christ himself, not the preacher, appeared to Paul and gave him eternal life. It is obvious in the story that there was no preacher or evangelical gospel present in this pattern. Only Christ and his elect child. Christ likewise speaks life individually into every one of his children without any medium, or assistance of the preached word. Regeneration is by God's sovereign work.

3. Paul was never the same after the light of life shined upon him. Though regeneration does not create perfect and absolute obedience, the once depraved individual is forever changed after regeneration.

In a word, Paul hated Christ, Christ himself gave life to him, and now he is changed forever. When the light of Christ shined onto Paul, he was given new life. There was no altar call. There was no well-meant offering. There was no pastor, preacher, evangelist, or missionary. There was only Christ and his precious child. This is what is called the pattern. Compare this with John 3:8
The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

This verse shows us both the sovereignty of God in regeneration and the identical nature (pattern) of regeneration. The sovereignty of God in regeneration is shown by the phrase, “The wind bloweth where it listeth.” The identical nature (pattern) of regeneration is shown by the phrase, “so is every one that is born of the Spirit.”

Again, regeneration is always, without exception, accomplished by God's sovereignty without any human medium.

Some have pointed out that this would contradict the mystery of regeneration, because we could exactly pinpoint when Paul was regenerated. This mystery is also illustrated by Christ in John 3:8,

"...thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth..." I agree that we do not know when we were conceived in the womb, and likewise, most could not give a definitive time when they were born again. But the Bible isn't written by the power and ability of man. It is written under the power and inspiration of God. It should be no problem to the Bible reader that God has given us a pattern of regeneration and the exact time it happened. He is God and knows when all of his children are regenerated.

Why did God give us this pattern? Paul says that mercy was shown in him first. This does not mean that he was the first person ever regenerated. Through the surety of Christ's sacrifice, God has been quickening his children before the cross, even all the way back to the righteous Abel. The men of the Old Testament, as recorded in Hebrews 11, served God by faith. Faith is a fruit of the Spirit. If they had faith then they had the Spirit in them. So how was Paul the 'first.' The word first in verse 16 has reference to the preeminence of the example and not any chronological aspect. Paul's extreme example illustrates perfectly both man's depravity and God's sovereignty in regeneration. The phrase “to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting” is then not a condition for eternal life, but a declarative statement reminding those who do believe why they are able to do so. If you have been blessed to hear the preached word and believe it, then Christ has already shined his glorious light into your heart. Paul is the pattern.

"And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus."

1 Timothy 1:14

Paul's radical transformation brought about by God's grace is described as being abundant with faith and love. Every child of God is given the gift of faith and taught to love at the new birth.
hesians 2:8

Romans 12:3

1 John 3:16

1 Thessalonians 1:5

). Notice that this does not describe the actions of Paul, but instead, it describes the foundational essence of eternal life that was given to Paul at regeneration. This description is in complete contrast with his former life of blaspheming and persecuting. The grace of God in regeneration abounds with the qualities of eternal life. These qualities were not inherit to Paul, but were in Christ Jesus and given through grace. Again, just as we have seen that Paul's experience was completely brought about by God alone, this verse further proves that grace is a necessary prerequisite to any spiritual virtue. As it is in the natural world, so it is in the spiritual. The giving of life always precedes life. And life always precedes actions.

Our Example

Paul did not receive the grace of God in vain. Even while describing God's abundant grace to Timothy, Paul would break into a doxology, 1Timothy 1:17; “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

"After this experience, Paul's life would be active in the ministry of Christ. After being baptized, he would become the apostle to the Gentiles, write the majority of the New Testament, and go on many evangelistic journeys preaching this gospel of grace. Truly, Paul lived his life by the faith of the Son of God.

Not only was Paul's life lived as a memorial of grace, he continually felt indebted to Christ. His attitude never became puffed up or Pharisaical. Paul's attitude understood his own weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). His humility shown forth in understanding the present reality of his own sinfulness and Christ's wonderful salvation,

1Timothy 1:15

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief"

"How do we react to the message of sovereign grace? Does the knowledge of this grace comfort and prick our hearts? Does it offend us? Does it fall upon lukewarm ears? I trust that this message of grace is received with joy. As Christ saved Paul, he has also saved us in like
manner. But have we also respond as Paul? Have we asked Christ “what wilt thou have me to do?” Have we been baptized? Have we counted all but dung so that we may win the excellency of knowledge of Christ Jesus? Paul is certainly our pattern, but is he also our example?

“Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”
- John Newton