

The Conversion of Saul

A Bible Study for Talking about Allyship and Race

This Bible study was written for Black History Month, 2018, to support a discussion of the dynamics between descendants of European settlers and Black peoples in North America today. It particularly encourages White participants to explore the role of an ally, and to learn from the realities of their friends, neighbours, and cousins who are facing oppression and anti-Black racism.

Feel free to use the study at any time, and to adapt it to your group's circumstances. More preparation notes for creating a safe conversation space are included at the end.

Bible study outline (2 hours)

Welcome (5 min)

Opening prayer (5 min)

Introduction question (15 min)

Read the scripture together (5 min)

Initial reactions (15 min)

If group members are already engaged with the text or are very comfortable with each other, you may skip this step.

Second reading (5 min)

Deeper inquiry (45 min)

After the second reading, open up with the questions, exploring the issues in the text through the light of our own experiences.

Final analysis (20 min)

What specific messages do we take away for this time and place?

Closing prayer (5 min)

Welcome

Open the session with a few words of welcome, offering personal introductions and orientation to the space as appropriate. Name the history of the place where you are meeting, beginning with the Indigenous nations and any treaties signed with them. (For guidance, search “acknowledging the territory” on www.united-church.ca.) Also talk about the main groups that settled, were brought unwillingly, migrated, or came as refugees. This reminds us that many histories and realities have created this present moment. It may also be helpful to name the absences of history—the stories we do not know.

Consider naming different emotions that may come up during the session. This will help open the session with curiosity and truth.

Opening prayer

Choose a prayer from the United Church’s Black History Month resources (www.united-church.ca/worship) or another appropriate source.

Introduction question

Ask participants to consider and share either

- 1) the first time you were aware that someone had a different racial or cultural background from you, or
- 2) the first time you remember being aware of your own racial or cultural background

If you have a large three or four people to offer their answer.

Read the scripture together (Acts 9:1–22)

Read this background:

After Jesus ascended to heaven, the church was instituted on the day of Pentecost with the power of the Holy Spirit descending on the gathered followers of Jesus. And then their problems really started! Acts 7 records the speech of Stephen to the High Council, laying out the story of faith of those early believers. Stephen’s challenging words led to his execution by stoning, the first martyrdom. A young man named Saul approves of the killing, and becomes a persecutor of the other Christians in Act 8. The chapter features the growth of the church through the conversion stories of those who considered outcasts—a magician named Simon and an Ethiopian eunuch. Acts 9 then returns to Saul, his violent plans for the young church, and God’s plan for him...

Scripture (Acts 9:1–22)

The passage can be divided between four readers as shown here.

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 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?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." (1–6)

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (7–9)

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (10–16)

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah. (17–22)

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Initial reactions

If your group is small enough, invite everyone to answer one question to the whole group, with the option to pass if they wish. If you have 10 or more people, you might ask the group to divide into pairs or triads for a few minutes, leaving time to “harvest” four or five responses for the whole group afterward.

You might note the danger of interpreting the healing in this story as a physical cure, and how that understanding would impact people with disabilities—who have not been “cured”—today. Jesus’ healing may better be understood as transformation. See the United Church blog [“Finding Hope in Disability”](#) (Dec. 11, 2017).

- 1) If you are familiar with this story, did you hear anything new or surprising?
- 2) Is there a time in your life where your ideas were profoundly challenged or changed?
- 3) What is a harmful belief or practice that affects you now?

Second reading

As we consider this story, let us think about the relationship between Ananias and Saul. Who had the power, and why? What did each have to fear from each other? And what intervention brought about change?

Pay particular attention to the story of Ananias. How did he move through fear to action? What risks did he take and for what rewards? For members of the dominant culture, how can this help us understand the experiences of Black peoples in North America today?

What responsibilities do the victims of oppression hold toward their persecutors? What opportunities for conversion exist—and what are the costs for oppressed people?

Now, read the Bible text a second time, perhaps with different readers, and invite people to consider another round of question.

Deeper inquiry (questions to choose from)

- 1) What made it easy for Saul to condone, commit, and actively create violence against the Christians?

To spur the discussion, you might display the following responses and ask participants to elaborate on them: religious sanction; an initial bystander role; committing violence against an unfamiliar community; a sense of superior knowledge; a history/theology that permits violence against enemies; trauma of being an occupied people; a desire to maintain or rebuild Jewish authority under occupation.

2) What made Saul's conversion possible?

Sharing the same language and culture; sharing a history; the opportunity to have someone express care; the presence of an enemy who acted like a friend; the voice from heaven; the blinding light; the healing miracle; being outside of comfort zone; sense of guilt/wrongdoing

- 3) We are considering this pivotal Christian story in relation to the lessons of Black History Month. If we understand Ananias to be a persecuted individual, part of an oppressed minority, and we understand Saul to be an aggressive persecutor on behalf of the majority, how does this story influence our experience of Black History Month?
- 4) Saul and Ananias were both part of the same ethno-cultural community, but they lived in different places and had different religious convictions. Were they equal in power? Why or why not? What roles do personal choice, culture, heritage, and being chosen play in the power dynamic?
- 5) Ananias was sent by God to Saul, knowing he was a dangerous man, because God had chosen Saul. What risks was Ananias taking? What were the possibilities if he had refused? What kinds of emotions would he have felt about Saul and God's intentions?
- 6) Saul's immediate baptism implies that he has done a lot of thinking, without others knowing. What thinking have you had to do about race and racial justice out of the sight of others? Have you experienced intersecting identities, for example, of race with ability or economic means?
- 7) This story is often called the Conversion of Saul on the Road to Damascus. What might it be called if Ananias was named instead of Saul?
- 8) If you were to tell this story from the perspective of Ananias, what meaning would you make from Saul's arrival? What temptations might Ananias have felt? What hopes? What would have happened if Ananias refused?
- 9) Saul became a great leader in the church, and his writings have shaped our theology, politics, and society. What is the significance of his original antagonism toward Christians? How does his history of persecuting Jesus shape his commitment after his Damascus Road experience?
- 10) Saul's proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God amazes people because of who it is saying it, and the reputation of his violence from Jerusalem. Considering your social position and race, or culture, what does it mean for you to talk about racial justice, or equality, or reconciliation? Who would listen, and who would not listen? Is it easy or hard for you to do?
- 11) In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman's grandmother articulated the slave's common strategy: "I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read...I would not read that part of the Bible" that upheld slavery. Writings of the New Testament, many of them attributed to Paul, have been used to justify racism, slavery, misogyny,

transphobia, and homophobia. Some of those who suffer these oppressions have worked to “reclaim” Paul’s writing or interpret it as a consistent ethic of resistance to imperial power and domination. Others choose to discard these writings, like Thurman’s grandmother. Where do you stand?

- 12) In situations where injustice, violence, or persecution have taken place, the model of Truth and Reconciliation has been used to process some of those experiences and give voice to the victims. Do you think Ananias would have talked to Saul about the experiences of the Christians? Do you think Saul would have been surprised by what he heard?

Final analysis (20 minutes)

Black people in North America have endured anti-Black racism and discrimination in many forms. An oppressed community has to work hard to survive, and sometimes there are opportunities to educate non-oppressed people in the hopes of changing the systems of discrimination. For followers of Jesus in this particular time and place, what are the opportunities to resist and survive oppression?

- 1) What is required for a person facing oppression like Ananias to offer help to a person who represents oppression, like Saul?
- 2) What is the responsibility of those who face violence to educate others on their experience? What are the barriers they face in doing this?
- 3) Our faith calls for us to share the good news, or the gospel. When it comes to responding to racism in the world, where are you hearing good news? How life-giving or challenging do you find it?
- 4) What do you need in your life to help you share good news with your community?
- 5) How does Saul’s conversion compare to your experiences of learning and changing your mind? Would you use examples from this story to advise someone seeking to be an ally to an oppressed community?
- 6) There is racial violence and oppression between sects and religions today. Where is there conversion? What is needed for conversion?

Closing prayer

Either choose an appropriate prayer from the United Church’s Black History Month resources (www.united-church.ca/worship), or create something relevant to your community and your experience of the study. Consider offering some open space for participants to offer their reflections in a prayerful way, offering thanks to God or for support in trouble.

Preparation notes

Because this Bible study was written to explore relationships between people of European and African descent in a North American context, consider the racial composition of the group.

- Is the group primarily or wholly composed of people of one racial group?
- Are there a few people of a different races and cultures?
- Does the group already have a familiarity and rapport, or is it mostly people who have not yet spent time together in this way?
- Have people been encouraged to bring friends?

Considering these questions will help improve the safety and comfort of all participants. The Bible study is intended to provoke thought, discussion, and the sharing of experiences. The level of comfort and welcome each participant feels will influence how able they are to participate, and how impacted they might be by the conversation.

For example, if your group is primarily older people of White, European ancestry, who are all part of the same church congregation, and one of those people has invited two younger Black friends into the study, there are multiple dynamics already present in the room before the Bible study begins.

Potential pitfalls include

- the two younger people feeling excluded from in-jokes, cultural references and unfamiliar terminology
- the contributions of racialized people being missed or misunderstood by the larger White group
- conversely, members of the larger White group expecting the two racialized people to explain an unfamiliar concept or offer perspectives when they might not feel comfortable or equipped to do so

Don't let that discourage you! The existence of these pitfalls is in fact part of the reason for this Bible study. When people who have been historically marginalized or oppressed get together with those that have historically benefitted from oppression, it is not a neutral space. But it is a space to be carefully prepared for and thoughtfully managed, so that all participants will feel safe, included, and able to participate in navigating this difficult topic together.

About the author

As part of my work with the Student Christian Movement (SCM), I was invited into a group with staff of The United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ to explore implementation of the UN Decade for People of African Descent. Out of those relationships came the invitation to work on this resource. I was asked specifically to offer my perspective as someone seeking to be an ally to people of African descent who face many forms of racism and inequity in North American society, and in the church.

I wish to humbly name my limited perspective and my desire to deepen my understanding of the realities of anti-Black racism today. I hope that it is helpful for those of us seeking to be allies, in developing consciousness of the responsibilities and opportunities of our role, and in recognizing the tremendous work undertaken by those who endure racism, oppression, and injustice. I further hope that it opens up understanding of this most troubling and human of the apostles, whose legacy we wrestle with, seeking blessing.

May we be those that, through knowing our interwoven histories, teach a more excellent way hereafter.

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Peter is a member of Toronto United Mennonite Church, and since 2016 has worked with the Student Christian Movement of Canada.