



Witnessing to the Gospel in the Acts of the Apostles: Beyond the Conversion or Conversation Dilemma

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Not so long ago, when North American Christians talked about relationships with other religions, we did so at a comfortable distance. For the most part, the practitioners of those other religions lived elsewhere, separated from view by at least a national border, if not an ocean, and they came into discussion almost always under the heading of “foreign missions.” As the globe has constricted to a village, those days of distanced discussion have vanished, replaced by painful conversations about the nature and purpose of interreligious dialogue. This will not be an abstract problem for pastors, who may find that one parishioner insists that the church investigate denominational programs to make sure that they are rigorously conversionist, while the couple in the adjacent pew have just happily witnessed the wedding of their daughter to a Buddhist, other parishioners are experimenting in Eastern spiritualities, and a mosque is being constructed on a nearby corner. Ascertaining appropriate Christian responses to these developments is a matter of urgency.

Both conversionists (here referring to those who affirm that the responsible goal of interreligious dialogue is conversion to Christianity) and conversationalists

The question of conversion or conversation may be, for Luke, the wrong question. More important is simply being a faithful witness to the gospel of God, trusting in God's good will to produce the consequences God desires.

(here referring to those who affirm that dialogue itself promotes a better understanding of God as well as of our own faith traditions) will turn to Scripture for assistance. At first glance, the conversionists have an easier time of it, since they may appeal to the Johannine Jesus' assertion: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).¹ Conversionists also will not likely forget the warning of 2 Thessalonians about the parousia of Jesus as the

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occasion when he will seek "vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess 1:8). The words of the Great Commission at the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew seem to demand something more than conversation with people who are not believers. Conversationalists will not readily be silenced, however. The book of Job, with its insistence that the "world does not spin on the axes of guilt and innocence,"² suggests that God's agenda is not subject to human review or approval. Paul's assertion that "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (Rom 11:32) prompts conversationalists to ask of conversionists, "What part of the word 'all' don't you understand?"

Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, suggests that there is an alternative to collecting biblical texts with which to do battle on this question. Both conversionists and conversationalists will find their views confirmed in the book of Acts, with its engaging stories in which witnesses to the gospel journey from Jerusalem to Rome, encountering people as diverse as the Ethiopian eunuch in the middle of a deserted road, the businesswoman Lydia outside the city of Philippi, devotees of Artemis in the goddess's favored city of Ephesus, chattering philosophers in Athens, and the scheming Felix in Caesarea. As this essay will seek to demonstrate, both perspectives can make something of a case from within Acts, yet neither does justice to the riches of the Lukan story. Luke will not be a willing participant on either side of this debate, *because both perspectives attribute too much to human initiative and activity, neglecting the crucial question of God's role*. To ask whether Christians should be conversing or converting is to neglect the larger Lukan story of God's initiative in all that is Christian witness. That witness may take a variety of forms that change from place to place, and from circumstance to circumstance—but it is only a witness to the real agent, God, and to God's action in Jesus Christ and empowerment of believers through the Holy Spirit.

¹All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

²Edwin Good, "Job," *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2000) 391.

CONVERSION IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

When advocates of interreligious dialogue insist that Christians must approach it with a view to conversion, they might turn to Paul's final defense speech in Acts 26. Here Luke includes the third and final account of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road (see also 9:1-19 and 22:3-21).³ Unlike 9:6, which reports only that the risen Jesus tells Paul that he "will be told what" he is to do,⁴ and 22:21, which adds that Paul is being sent to the Gentiles, here the risen Jesus elaborates on Paul's call:

"I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." (Acts 26:16b-18)

The second half of this commission both condenses some major Lukan themes and reflects an understanding that Paul's witness involves him in what we would call conversion. Paul's work consists of enabling people to see rightly, so that they may "turn from darkness to light." Imagery of sight and blindness, light and darkness, figures powerfully in many religious traditions, but Luke draws upon it as early as the canticle of Zechariah ("the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death," Luke 1:79) and the first oracle of Simeon ("a light for revelation to the Gentiles," Luke 2:32). The Emmaus road recognition, the conversion of Paul, and the defeat of the magician Bar-Jesus all turn on the giving or taking away of sight. The conflict between God and Satan similarly recurs throughout Luke-Acts. Preceding Jesus' initial sermon in Nazareth, the devil tests him in a scene that concludes with the comment that "[w]hen the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13).⁵ That return comes with the betrayal of Judas (Luke 22:3), the lies of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:3), and the resistance of Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:10). Echoing John the Baptist's call for repentance (Luke 3:3, 7-8) and Peter's Pentecost speech (Acts 2:38; see also 3:19), Paul's vocation has as its goal that people might receive forgiveness of sins; their relocation to life among the sanctified has been dramatized throughout Acts, as communities of believers form in location after location.

These characteristically Lukan themes come together as Paul summarizes his activity in this pivotal defense, and precisely because they are so familiar it is easy to neglect their impact. Taken together, they unrelentingly assume that life

³For further discussion of these passages, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 52-95.

⁴Although see also the Lord's words to Ananias in 9:15-16.

⁵On the role of Satan and his partners in Luke-Acts, see Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

apart from the gospel is life without hope; it is life spent wandering in the middle of the night with one's eyes closed, in the captivity of Satan, without forgiveness,

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and isolated from community. The commission presupposes that conversion is a matter of real urgency. That Paul will engage in open-ended conversation with those who find help in other religious traditions seems highly unlikely, to put it mildly.

Following this restatement of his commission, Paul insists to Agrippa that he has been faithful to this vision, and even the most cursory reading of Acts confirms Paul's report. It also confirms the commission's uncompromising stance toward other religious commitments or practices. Following the Spirit's instructions in 13:1-4, Barnabas and Paul set out for what the Spirit identifies as “the work to which I have called them” (13:2). They initially travel to and then across the island of Cyprus, proclaiming “the word of God.” The first incident Luke narrates involves them in preaching to a significant local official, Sergius Paulus, who has invited Barnabas and Paul to talk with him about the gospel. This conversation is hindered by the fascinating character Luke describes as “a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus,” who is also known as Elymas. Paul confronts Bar-Jesus because of his interference and announces that God is about to blind him, which instantly takes place. The effect of this negative miracle is so powerful that Sergius Paulus becomes a believer (13:4-12). This sharp reaction to someone who would interfere with Christian proclamation, especially coming as it does at the outset of the journey, confirms the conversionist notion that Christian witness means something more than conversation. Paul does not chat with Bar-Jesus; instead, he calls on God to stop him.

It is not only Paul whose story in Acts reinforces the claims of conversionists. Although Peter's speeches do not call for Jews to *convert*, there being no new religion to which they could convert, these speeches nevertheless make exclusive claims about the gospel that are central to the conversionist stance.⁶ This point comes to expression most vividly in Peter's speech before the council in chapter 4, when he concludes that “there is salvation in no one else [except Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (4:12; see also 2:21). Although uttered in a Jewish context, there can be little doubt that Luke understands this to be the case for all, Jew and Gentile alike. Salvation, a term that

⁶Given the ease with which Christians and Jews now refer to themselves as adherents of separate religions, this point requires some clarification. Luke presents repeated calls in Acts for Jews to repent and to recognize Jesus as God's Messiah, but he also interprets that Messiah as the fulfillment of ancient promises made to Israel rather than as the bringer of a new religion.

combines aspects of life we would distinguish from one another as physical, spiritual, and social dimensions, exists nowhere except in Jesus Christ.⁷

CONVERSATION IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

These emphatic, exclusive claims do not tell the entire story, however. Luke's complex narrative has an intriguing habit of resisting the sort of simplified reading that reduces all to a single theme or motif. That generalization holds true for the question of conversion and conversation as it does for other issues. Surveying the Lukan terrain, conversationalists may well find a starting point at the Areopagus. In Athens Paul not only preaches in the synagogues but in the public marketplace where he encounters the chattering classes of that famous city. Before the philosophically inclined intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals, Paul makes no claims about salvation in Jesus Christ. Perhaps to our astonishment, he does not mention the name of Jesus at all. In the speech recounted in chapter 17, Paul begins by affirming the religiosity of the Athenians. He draws on shared convictions that God "does not live in shrines made by human hands" (v. 24), and he makes use of lines from popular poets. The speech and the unenthusiastic response it elicits do not constitute a conversation, but they do show the adaptability of Paul's witness to varying circumstances. The strategy of recalling the history of Israel and introducing Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises may work in Jerusalem, but in Athens it would be little more than gibberish.⁸

More challenging to the conversionist stance is the account in 27:1-28:10 of the journey that takes Paul from Caesarea to Rome. Despite warnings from Paul about the dangers ahead, the authorities in charge set sail. During the course of the storm and shipwreck, Paul speaks several times, emerging as the virtual leader of the ship. His first speech reports on a divine vision that promises safety to all on board and urges courage (27:21-26). Later he speaks again to warn the Romans in charge that the sailors are attempting to flee the ship (v. 31). Again, he speaks, promising the survival of all and urging that everyone eat. Here Luke adds that Paul "took bread" and gave "thanks to God in the presence of all," before he himself began to eat. Although Paul declares his own faith here in "the God to whom I belong and whom I worship," he does not engage in proclamation with a view to conversion or demand that all join in his faith. There is also, of course, no conversation about varying faiths, but Luke seems content to show Paul praying and giving thanks among unbelievers without also proclaiming the gospel.

Sheer necessity may be supposed to have precluded either conversation or conversion on a beleaguered ship (although since *Paul* knows all will be rescued, he

⁷On the understanding of salvation in Luke-Acts, see Joel Green, "Salvation to the End of the Earth: God as the Saviour in the Acts of the Apostles," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. H. Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 83-106.

⁸See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Traditions in Conversation and Collision: Reflections on Multiculturalism in the Acts of the Apostles," in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. Brian K. Blount and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 30-41.

might have more confidence about forthright speech). Exigency does not seem to play a role on the island of Malta, where the shipwrecked survivors are offered hospitality (28:1-10). In a disturbing incident, Paul is bitten by a viper, prompting the islanders to conclude that he must be a murderer whom divine justice will not permit to escape. When he miraculously does not die, the natives conclude that he must be a god. That Paul offers no correction for this misunderstanding will astonish readers who recall the death of Herod (12:20-25) and the response of Barnabas and Paul to the Lystrans (14:8-20). The silence persists during the entire three-month sojourn on the island (28:11), where nothing is said about offering the gospel to the residents, although this might seem to some a perfect opportunity for an evangelistic crusade.

Standing as they do, so near to the end of the book, these stories at least open up the possibility that Luke knows of engagement with people of other religious traditions that is not exclusively aimed at conversion. These are not vignettes drawn from an interreligious conference, but they also are not recollections from a revival meeting. At the very least, Luke is not uncomfortable including them, without explanation, at a crucial stage in his story of Paul's witness.

WITNESSING TO THE GOSPEL OF GOD

What should we make of these apparent inconsistencies in Luke's presentation? Given the care with which Luke writes, they are probably not the accidental by-product of sloppiness or inattention. They may mean that the question of conversion or conversation is, at least for Luke, the wrong question. To understand that possibility, we need to return to the beginning of Acts, where Jesus speaks for

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the last time to the apostles: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). Two powerful convictions come to expression here: (1) that the activity of the apostles does not stem from their own plan or endeavor, and (2) that they are witnesses from and for Jesus Christ.

First, the apostles do not themselves decide on a plan and then proceed to carry it through on their own. Instead, at Pentecost they are empowered by the Spirit that is sent by Jesus and has been promised by God (see 1:4-5; Luke 24:49). The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost overtakes gathered believers and finds Peter, recently unable even to admit his own association with Jesus (Luke 22:54-62), emerging as spokesperson for the church. Yet Pentecost is only the first of many occasions on which Luke makes it clear that the church does not formulate its own objectives or even speak for itself. At numerous points, Luke indicates that the Holy Spirit fills believers so that they speak, as when Peter speaks before the

council in 4:8 and when Stephen argues with opponents in 7:8. The undeniable presence of the Spirit at Cornelius's home—not some mission strategy forged in Jerusalem—forces Peter to baptize him and his household (10:44-48). Similarly, it is the Spirit rather than believers in Antioch who instigates the mission of the Antioch church by directing the prophets and teachers there to send Barnabas and Saul out as witnesses (13:1-4). Even Paul's venture into Macedonia comes about when the Spirit forbids preaching in Asia, then Bithynia; only a vision makes clear what lies next on the travel plan. In other words, the church's engagement with non-believers comes into being and is sustained through God's action in Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The second conviction has to do with the identity of the apostles as witnesses. As in contemporary life, so in Luke's world, a witness is someone who offers testimony in legal cases, where the stakes are often high and the truth is demanded without regard to consequences.⁹ Not only at this beginning point but throughout Acts, Luke refers to the apostles and others as witnesses of what has taken place. Judas's replacement is to join the apostles as "a witness" to the resurrection (1:22), and Peter's early sermons identify him and the others as witnesses to the resurrection (2:32; 3:15). Although Luke is at least reluctant to identify Paul as an apostle,¹⁰ he does refer to him as a witness (22:15; 26:16).

Granted the significance of the role of witnesses in Acts, it may be instructive to linger over that term in relationship to the conversion-conversation debate. In a courtroom, a witness does not have the responsibility to convert hearers to her point of view; she is instead obliged to tell the truth as she understands it. Neither does a witness engage in the exchange of views and opinions definitive of conversation. The witnesses in Luke's story do not all testify in a legal setting, but they do appear to conform to this notion of witness as someone who tells the truth without

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regard to the consequences that may follow. Finally, for Luke, it is not human beings who cause the witness to be received, but God, who calls both the near and the far off (as in 2:39).

If Luke's second volume endorses neither the posture of the conversionists nor that of the conversationalists, then what help might Acts offer in response to the question of how Christians today engage with those of other faiths? As with many other questions, Luke offers no blueprint that can simply be duplicated for

⁹Unfortunately, some contemporary developments, such as the use of expert "witnesses," give the word less potency than it once had, but of course Luke also knows about "false witnesses" (6:13).

¹⁰The stipulation of 1:21-22 would seem to mean that Paul is simply unqualified for the term "apostle," and Luke applies it to him only at 14:4, 14.

kingdom building in the twenty-first century. Our situation is radically different from that of the church Luke depicts; perhaps more important, Luke narrates a witness that changes from one location to another, adapting to new environments and new challenges. Nevertheless, Luke may shape our thinking in some important ways. It is precisely the changing witness in Acts (from Jerusalem to Athens to Malta) that necessitates our understanding that our witness also is not of the “one size fits all” variety. Perhaps the sharp call for conversion needs to be voiced and heeded closer to home—in shopping malls and offices and local churches—before it is ready to travel. The listening involved in conversation with people of other faiths may be exactly what *we* need in order to understand how our witness appears in the contemporary world. More important than these possibilities is Luke’s stress on the role of God, the risen Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Fundamentally, from Luke 1:1 through Acts 28:31, Luke elaborates on Gabriel’s words to Mary, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” That confidence in God’s power and God’s salvation invites believers of every age to be less confident in their own conclusions and more trusting of God’s good will. ⊕

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