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Conversion, Conversation, and Acts 15

LOIS MALCOLM

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials.

Acts 15:28

Conversion and conversation are often set in opposition in Christian theology and practice. Those interested in *conversion* often want to change other people's hearts and minds to be like their own. Those interested in *conversation*, by contrast, do not often seek to change other people's minds because "deep down," they believe, we are really all alike. Things may be more complex than this, however. Converts bring new problems, questions, and issues. Jesus' identity and the salvation he brings may be understood very differently when interpreted against the backdrop of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or even secular concerns.¹ What is distinctively Christian about sexual morality and family life may look very different in a polygamous culture than in one that celebrates individual freedom of expression.

In turn, in spite of the prediction several decades ago that we would be deeply secularized by the turn of the century, sociologists have identified the phenomenon

¹See, for example, Gavin D'Costa's argument in "The End of Systematic Theology," *Theology* 95 (September/October 1992) 324-334.

Conversion and conversation converge in the light of trinitarian theology and in the book of Acts. The point of our moving beyond Jerusalem, of our outreach, is not to make others like ourselves, but to participate in an event that calls everyone involved out of themselves into something new and larger than themselves.

of “desecularization.” Conservative and fundamentalist forms of religious expression have arisen throughout the world, whether in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism, partly in response to the cultural and political changes brought about by such developments as the “globalization” of a capitalist economy.² Far from being indifferent to religious and ethical values, a phenomenon like globalization often brings tremendous social change, such as the breakdown of traditional family

“recent biblical scholarship may cause us to rethink what we mean by conversion and conversation”

and religious practices, among other things. Advocates of conversation (or religious dialogue or tolerance), whether they are aware of it or not, are often identified with the very developments (like globalization) that these religious revivals seek to counter.

Recent biblical scholarship may cause us to rethink what we mean by conversion and conversation. The theme of hospitality in the New Testament, for instance, has opened up new ways of thinking about Christian mission. It points to the centrality of outsiders and outcasts in many biblical stories, where they often are both guests and, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, hosts.³ In this paper, I offer a theological reading of Acts 15, which presents a paradigmatic instance in the early Christian movement of how a predominantly Jewish Christianity was transformed by its encounter with Gentile Christians.⁴

CONVERSION, CONVERSATION, AND THE TRINITY

Let us first, however, define how we are using the words conversion and conversation. Bernard Lonergan roots his proposal for theological method in the act of conversion, which he defines as the “about face” or the new beginning that comes about when a person moves from one “horizon” or way of viewing the world to another.⁵ Lonergan’s methodology stands in line with a long theological tradition deeply influenced by Augustine’s depiction of how we participate in God’s knowing and loving as we ourselves know and love. Indeed, Lonergan’s method can be seen as depicting a set of exercises for discerning God’s presence and activity in hu-

²See Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999). See also Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000). Contrast Berger’s current work with his earlier work in *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies: Christian Commitment and the Religious Establishment* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961) and *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

³See, for example, John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and his more recent *The Feast of the World’s Redemption: Eucharistic Origins and Christian Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

⁴See, for example, Michael Welker’s discussion of the relationship between contemporary biblical scholarship and systematic theology in “Christian Theology: What Direction at the End of the Second Millennium?” in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 73-88.

⁵Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

man thinking and acting.⁶ Conversion occurs at three levels—intellectual, moral, and religious. At each level, distorted habits of thought, feeling, and speech are overcome so that one can not only perceive truth and goodness with greater and greater clarity but enact it as well. One does this by developing skills at (1) experiencing, (2) understanding, (3) judging, and (4) deciding—thus, Lonergan’s four transcendental rules: “Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and if necessary change.”⁷ David Tracy, Lonergan’s student, appropriates this focus on conversion as the focal point for theological method. Nonetheless, he rethinks it in terms of conversation, as the act of losing oneself in the truth of the subject matter, in the questioning provided by an “other,” whether that other be a text or another person. In a fashion analogous to Lonergan’s four transcendental rules, his conception of conversation requires that one be willing to argue, confront, and, if the evidence suggests it, perhaps even change one’s mind.⁸

What would Tracy’s conception of theology as conversation look like if conceived as an activity that participates in God’s trinitarian life? To address this, I turn to Rowan Williams’s chapter on “Trinity and Revelation,” which suggests that we rethink what we mean by revelation in terms more compatible with Tracy’s conception of conversation.⁹ Williams’s essay counters two ways of understanding revelation: defining it in terms of a propositional account of truth (characteristic of Protestant and Catholic “orthodox” theologies) and defining it in relation to an unmediated awareness of the transcendent (characteristic of “liberal” theologies). Both conceptions ultimately conceive of truth as separable from historical reflection and appropriation—as beyond “debate, conflict, ambivalence, polysemy, paradox.”¹⁰ Williams suggests that revelatory truth has to do with a “life-giving project,” a “proposal made in hope,” and a “looking towards a future of shared life with God and others.” That kind of revelatory truth, he suggests, is more compatible with a trinitarian account of revelation:

‘God reveals himself’ means that the meaning of the word ‘God’ establishes itself among us as the loving and nurturing advent of *newness* in human life—grace, forgiveness, empowerment to be the agents of forgiveness and liberation. This advent has its center, its normative focus, in the record of Jesus; it occurs among us now as the re-presentation of Jesus through the Spirit; and it rests upon and gives content to the fundamentally regulative notion of initiative, creative or generative power, potentiality, that is not circumscribed by the conditions of the empirical world—the *arché* of the Father, the ultimate source.¹¹

⁶See, for example, Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967); see also Saint Augustine, *The Trinity*. See also David Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” *Theology Today* 55/2 (July 1998) 235-241.

⁷Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240-241.

⁸David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

⁹Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 131-147.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 132.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 145.

This conception of revelation has nothing to do with finding an Archimedean point of “privileged non-ambiguous language and practice in the midst of fragmented reality.”¹² Rather, it has to do with what breaks open existing frames of reference and initiates new possibilities in life. It has to do with what “decisively advances or extends debates,” what extends rather than limits “the range of ambiguity and conflict in language,” and what posits fresh questions rather than answers old ones. In other words, to identify a text, tradition, event, or person as revelatory, according to Williams, is to witness to its “generative power”—its power to question our present life in light of a past that opens up a new future for us.

A READING OF ACTS 15

This conception of revelatory truth helps us understand what happens when, in the book of Acts, people receive and experience the “Holy Spirit with power” or try to manipulate or resist it. Indeed, the phrase “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” encapsulates what happens throughout the book as a whole (Acts 15:28). Found at the heart of the book, this phrase signifies the shift the church undergoes from being centered in Jerusalem to being flung throughout the world from “Jerusalem” to “Judea and Samaria” to the “ends of the earth” (1:8).¹³ After this story, Paul’s missionary activities are the focus in Acts; the Jerusalem apostles are last mentioned in 16:4. This phrase is part of a letter sent by the Jerusalem church to the church in Antioch to deal with the issue of whether Gentile converts need to be circumcised and follow Mosaic law, an issue of “no small dissension and debate” (v. 2; cf. 12:18-19).

To discuss the matter, Paul and Barnabas, the missionaries who had started the church in Antioch, had been sent to Jerusalem, along with other congregational leaders. The first thing Paul, Barnabas, and the others do when they arrive in Jerusalem is to report “all that God had done with them” (v. 4). But their reception in Jerusalem is very different from the reception they received in Phoenicia and Samaria: there believers responded to their report about new Gentile converts with “great joy” (v. 3). In Jerusalem, they are greeted with the challenge from more conservative Jewish Christians that new Gentile converts in Antioch must be circumcised and ordered to keep Mosaic law (v. 5).

Leaders of the Jerusalem church meet to deliberate on the matter (v. 6). After some debate, Peter stands and gives a speech in defense of the new converts. Peter’s speech uses reasons similar to those he used to defend his actions in the Cornelius event (see Acts 10 and Acts 11:1-18). He observes that God “[gave] them the Holy

¹²Ibid., 132.

¹³Joseph Fitzmeyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 538-539. See also Justo L. Gonzáles, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001). My reading of Acts 15 has also been influenced by conversations with Beverly Gaventa, who is working on *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Abingdon, forthcoming). See also Gaventa’s essay in this issue of *Word & World*.

Spirit, just as he did to us” (v. 8), making “no distinction between them and us” (v. 9). This point about “no distinction” echoes his speech in Cornelius’s household where he pointed out that “God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34, 35). Indeed, he asks his hearers—in a fashion very similar to his query in 11:17 (“[W]ho was I that I could hinder God?”)—“[W]hy are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” (v. 10). Note that to put God to the test means to mistrust God.¹⁴ Peter concludes with a final appeal: “[W]e will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (v. 11).¹⁵ When Peter finishes speaking, the assembly grows silent. Then Barnabas and Paul report “the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (v. 12).

When they finish, James stands up to give a speech. If Peter was an important authority for the early Jewish Christians to have speak on behalf of the new Gentile converts, then James—identified even by Paul as “the brother of the Lord” (Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12)—is probably an even more important authority for their cause. Quoting Amos 9:11-12, he contends that God’s plan has always included the Gentiles; God will rebuild the fallen “dwelling of David” so that “all other peoples may seek the Lord even all the Gentiles” (vv. 16-17). Indeed, he goes on: the Lord “has been making these things known from long ago” (vv. 17b-18). Although James’s speech revises both the Septuagint and the original Hebrew, its intent is clear: to demonstrate that Amos had already foreshadowed how God would incorporate the Gentiles into Israel.¹⁶ With this defense he concludes that “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God” (v. 19). “Turning” here refers to their conversion. He then introduces the four things the new converts are to abstain from—idols, fornication, whatever has been strangled, and blood—things that all people, according to Jewish law, should abstain from, and not only the Jews (vv. 20-21).¹⁷

When he finishes his speech, there is more deliberation. Then the leaders of the Jerusalem church choose two representatives to go with Paul and Barnabas to the church in Antioch, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas. They take with them a letter that gives the same decision James arrived at in his speech: that the new converts are to have “no further burden than these essentials,” the four restrictions listed in James’s speech. The letter states that the representatives were “unanimously” chosen (v. 25), and it introduces the final decision with the phrase “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (v.28).¹⁸

¹⁴On testing God, see also Exod 15:22-27; 17:2, 7; Num 14:22; Isa 7:12; Ps 77: 18, 41, 56; Wis 1:2.

¹⁵Cf. Rom 3:24; 4:16; 5:21. Note that the timeless aorist infinitive is used (σωθηῖν) to express “salvation” in an eschatological sense.

¹⁶Note that James transposes the Amos 9:11-12 of the LXX for his purposes; the sense of the original Hebrew has a completely different meaning.

¹⁷See also 15:29; 21:25. In Lev 17:8-18:30, these regulations are for Israel and foreigners.

¹⁸Fitzmeyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 553. This chapter may be combining two issues Gentile converts raised for the Jerusalem church: matters pertaining to (1) circumcision and Mosaic law and (2) diet and marital arrangements.

CONVERSION AND CONVERSATION IN LIGHT OF ACTS 15

Conversions of all sorts are found throughout Acts. As described of Paul and Silas, the missionaries in Acts really do “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). People respond to the Christian proclamation by repenting and receiving the forgiveness of sins, baptism, and the Holy Spirit. This basic pattern, which entails not merely transformation but transformation at the deepest level, recurs throughout Acts—although it does not always occur in that order.¹⁹ Not merely a formal process divorced from a specific content or reality, this pattern has to do with a specific experience of “power” that happens when the Holy Spirit comes over people (1:8).

“the Spirit Jesus sends generates new ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and experiencing, ways that carry both the speaker and the hearer beyond themselves into the reign of God”

Jesus promises the Spirit to his apostles after forty days of appearing to them after his resurrection and speaking about the kingdom of God (1:3).

The Spirit’s power is concrete and palpable, and tied to a specific person—Jesus of Nazareth—and a specific set of messianic expectations. It is not merely a grammar of beliefs and practices to be taught and learned. The point in the movement from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth is not to get other people to think like oneself—or even have the same kind of experiences one has had. The point, rather, is to participate in an event that calls all the participants out of themselves into something new and much larger than themselves. The Spirit Jesus sends generates new ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and experiencing, ways that carry both the speaker and the hearer beyond themselves into the reign of God that was at the heart of Jesus’ preaching. Pentecost, with its graphic depiction of a “rush of violent wind and tongues of fire” resting on each speaker, is a paradigm for this kind of event. Believers speak in languages they did not know and are understood by those standing around them who hear their own language. Although each one speaks a different language—this is not a case of bland homogenization—all are speaking about God’s deeds of power (Acts 2:11). The universality depicted in this event anticipates what is to happen in the rest of Acts.

No longer limited by spatial and temporal limitations, Jesus’ Spirit is at work in people’s lives—nudging them to do certain things, go certain places, meet certain people and at other points avoid certain things, places, or people. Without losing his historical identity, Jesus is freed, in the resurrection of his crucified flesh, to send his messengers throughout the world. Philip, Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and others are told where to go and where not to go. And if the Spirit is at work in the lives of people being sent to proclaim the message, then this same Spirit is also at work preparing people to hear the “message” of “how God appointed Jesus of Nazareth

¹⁹On repentance, forgiveness, baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit, see Acts 2:37-47; see also 8:16; 10:44-48; 19:1-6.

with the Holy Spirit and with power” (10:38). The Spirit is already at work in the life of Cornelius, “a centurion of the Italian cohort, as it was called” (10:1), a man who already was “devout” and “feared God with all his household,” giving “alms generously to the people and praying constantly to God” (10:2).

Further, if the Spirit is active among Gentiles even before the apostles arrive, then the Spirit is also active among the apostles and disciples after the Gentiles receive baptism and the Spirit. The Spirit helps the apostles and disciples break open their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting so they can participate in the world of God’s reign—the world of the Spirit’s power—a world not limited by a particular set of social, ethnic, or ritual prescriptions. Thinking patterns, ways of being and acting, are radically transformed and reshaped. Peter is told to eat what he had previously thought was unclean; deep, deep patterns—even attitudes and feelings of

“as new converts are added to the Christian community, believers have to think again, and think hard, about what is essential and non-essential in Christian belief and practice”

revulsion toward certain kinds of food—are redefined. Jewish-Christian believers see before their eyes the Spirit fall upon uncircumcised Gentile converts the same way the Spirit had among them; people who were previously thought to be profoundly unholy are now loci for the presence of the Holy Spirit. And even James, a venerable leader of the Jerusalem church, and the congregation in Jerusalem itself reach, after much deliberation, a new understanding of how Gentile converts are to be initiated into the faith. As new converts are added to the Christian community, believers have to think again, and think hard, about what is essential and non-essential in Christian belief and practice. Indeed, if a major theme in Acts has to do with how the apostles and disciples “receive power” when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, then a key sub-theme has to do with what happens when they avoid or resist the Spirit’s power. Recall, for instance, Peter’s desire not to put God “to the test.” The greatest danger in Acts is that of being “uncircumcised in heart and ears” (7:51)—having hearts that are dull, ears that are hard of hearing, and eyes that are shut (see, for example, Paul’s quote of Isa 6:9-10 in Acts 28:26-27).²⁰

Moreover this movement of conversion, or better, having the world “turned upside down,” does not take place in abstraction from actual conversation and interaction, from people actually spending time together, breaking bread in one another’s homes and eating food with “glad and generous hearts,” and “praising God” (see Acts 2:26-27).²¹ Again,

²⁰Unfortunately, Christians have throughout the centuries often interpreted this depiction of the resistance of the Pharisees to the Spirit’s power in Acts in highly anti-Semitic ways; the same can be said of interpretations of Jesus’ conflicts with authorities in the gospels. A more fruitful line of interpretation would be to see what it might have to say about hardness of heart within Christian communities, especially among those with authority and power.

²¹Note how this contrasts with the standard depiction of “revelation” (as doctrine, history, inner experience, dialectical presence, or new awareness). See, for example, Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983).

Pentecost is the paradigm for this, as is Joel’s prophetic vision²² and Luke’s depiction of the community in Jerusalem where all things are shared in common and “signs and wonders” take place.²³ A cursory comparison of the various speeches in Acts exemplifies this as well. Peter’s accusing speech to the “Israelites” in Acts 2, with its richly layered appeals to biblical texts as well as the history of Jesus’ own life, contrasts sharply with his more irenic appeal in Acts 10 to Cornelius’s Gentile household.²⁴ In Cornelius’s household, his focus is not on how Jesus fulfills the Scripture but on the God who shows no partiality among people. The content of these two speeches, in turn, differs radically from that of Paul’s speech at the Areopagus, where Jesus’ name is not even mentioned—much less his Jewish background—and appeals instead are made to the general human “search for God” using quotations from Greek poets.²⁵ It is clear that elements like context, speaker, audience, and the purpose of the speech affect the content of what is said in each speech. And it is not only potential converts who have to be persuaded by arguments. Luke devotes much space to Peter’s arguments to circumcised believers in Jerusalem, defending why he accepted Cornelius’s hospitality, for which he had been criticized (Acts 11:1-18). These arguments are given after a long and detailed account of his visit with Cornelius and the visions—to both Cornelius and Peter—that led up to it (Acts 10:1-48). They will soon be followed by the detailed arguments Peter and James give to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem regarding what to do with the new Gentile converts in Antioch, arguments culminating in the conclusion regarding what “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”

It is interesting to note that this story has a similar function in the book of Galatians, where it occurs at the beginning of the letter (2:1-10). Although there are differences between the two accounts, they both make a similar theological point. For Paul, it serves as support for Paul’s argument against the “Judaizers,” rival missionaries who are trying to persuade Paul’s converts to undergo circumcision. It buttresses his argument that Jesus’ crucifixion is an apocalyptic event marking the end of the present age. Human beings are no longer in bondage to “elemental spirits” (στοιχεῖα), whether they be norms, such as codes of behavior set forth in Jewish law, or simply powers that oppress people. “Faith in Jesus Christ” rather than “works of the law” justifies a person before God (2:16). One receives the Holy Spirit by believing the gospel of Christ. Baptism into Christ’s death replaces fundamental human distinctions—Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female—with a new unity in Christ (3:23-29). In the community of Christ’s Spirit, conceit, competition, and envy are replaced with a freedom that leads not to self-indulgence but love, along with all else that embodies the fruit of the Spirit and enacts the “new

²²Acts 2:17-21; cf. the Septuagint version of Joel 2:28-32.

²³Acts 2:43-47; see also 4:32-37; 5:12-16.

²⁴Contrast Peter’s speeches in Acts 2:22-36 and Acts 10:34-43.

²⁵The quotation (“In him we live and move and have our being”) in Acts 17:27 may come from the sixth-century B.C. philosopher-poet Epimedes. The second quotation in the same verse (“For we too are his offspring”) is from Aratus (*Phaenomena* 5), a third-century B.C. poet.

creation” that is now “everything” beyond either circumcision or uncircumcision (6:14-15).

My focus in this paper has simply been this. As described in Acts, “conversion” and “conversation” are about participating in the power of the crucified Jesus’ exalted Spirit. Palpable and concrete, this Spirit is linked specifically with a message about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Yet this concreteness and specificity lead not to insularity but greater and greater involvement with the rest of the world.²⁶ Indeed, the Spirit of Jesus always brings repentance and forgiveness, which are highly generative ways of perceiving and responding to life. And we do not experience this Spirit’s power in isolation from fragmentary language and history—in some abstracted Archimedean point—but in very concrete human activities like prayer and praise, eating, and persuasion, deliberation, and debate. In sum, by “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ,” we find ourselves propelled into the much larger world the Spirit’s power is already creating. May we, like Paul, not “hinder” this power but “with all boldness” immerse ourselves fully in its healing joy (Acts 23:30). ⊕

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²⁶From a Jewish perspective, note Jon Levenson’s very intriguing comment at the end of *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* in which he states: “In light of the *universalistic* dimension of that legacy (e.g., Gen 9:1-17), it is not surprising that both Judaism and Christianity have proven able to affirm the spiritual dignity of those who stand outside their own communities. But the two traditions lose definition and fade when that *universalistic* affirmation overwhelms that *ancient, protean, and strangely resilient story* of the death and resurrection of the beloved son” (New Haven: Yale, 1993) 232; my emphasis.