

Meaning and Process of Conversion in the Encounter between Christianity and People of other Faiths as Reflected in Acts 13

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Samevatting

Die bevestiging dat Christelike sending onderskeidend verbaal (kerugmaties) van aard is, in die sin dat geloof uit die gehoor is en gehoor uit die evangelie-prediking voortkom, word deur hierdie artikel versterk, maar terselfdertyd nie so dat dit ten koste van dade en diensbaarheid geskied nie. Maar bekering vind plaas by die aanhoor van die evangelie, en dan ook verder deur die getuienis van die toekoms, naamlik deurdat die roeping om 'n geheiligde lewe te lei, wat deur bekering voorafgegaan word, bevestig word. Dit stel 'n gebalanseerde siening van bekering daar, eerder as 'n 'piëtistiese' of slegs 'sosiale' evangeliese verstaan daarvan.

1. Introduction

There is a profound desire among the adherents of all monotheistic and missionary faiths such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity to share the riches of their faith and heritage to the world. Islam engages in the *Da'wah*¹ to convert non-Muslims to their faiths, Christianity engages in the great commission² in order to convert the world for Christ, and Judaism used to engage in the same process of converting Gentiles to their faith.³ Proselytism in such religious traditions is inevitable because these types of religions are soteriological religions. Speaking of the Christian faith, JH Bavinck remarked that “the idea of redemption is not just one of several elements, but it is the heart of it. We are dealing here with the redemption by Jesus Christ”.⁴

1 The solemn duty of a Muslim to share his faith at all times and by all means.

2 Matthew 28:18-20 is one of the key texts.

3 Jeffers, J.S. The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament era. 1999, 217.

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The title of this paper presupposes that conversion from one religion to another is a present reality. It is a common thing in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, (the context the author is more familiar with, to witness people converting in large numbers from the African Traditional Religion(s) to Islam or Christianity and *vis a vis*. This type of conversion is also taking place within the same religious system like in Christianity wherein it is common to see people flocking from mainline churches to Pentecostal and or charismatic churches). Conversion and the process involved are therefore inevitable whenever and wherever there is an encounter between people of diverse religious affiliations. A theologian like JH Bavinck sees conversion of humanity as one of the goals of Christian mission.⁵ This paper seeks to explore the concept conversion and the process involved within the Christian mission as reflected in their encounter with the Jews and Gentiles in Acts 13. The importance of conversion in Christian mission is captured in the following words:

‘Fellowship’ minus the passion for conversion leads to ghettoism;
‘service’ minus the call to conversion is a gesture without hope;
Christian education minus conversion is religiosity without decision;
and ‘dialogue’ without challenge to conversion remains sterile talk.⁶

It is my presupposition that mission and conversion belongs together in Christianity, and therefore the call to conversion cannot be detached from our engagements as Christians with people of other faiths as reflected in Paul and Barnabas’s encounter with Judaism, God-fearing Gentiles, and other Gentiles whose religious affiliation is not clearly articulated in Acts 13. It is therefore the author’s purpose with this article to say something about (a) Christian mission in the witness of Acts 13, (b) conversion in the witness of Acts 13, and then move on to (c) propose some missional implications for Christian mission among people of other faiths.

2. Christian mission in the witness of Acts 13

What is it that we can make out of the Christian mission as reflected in Acts 13? A cursory or detailed (exegetical) reading of Acts 13 bears testimony to the following regarding the Christian mission:

2.1 Christian mission belongs to God

The first and most important foundational principle of Christian mission is that mission belongs to God. From the beginning to the very end, God

5 Jeffers, J.S. The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament era. 1999, 217.

6 Bavinck, J.H. The church between the temple and mosque. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

is to be seen as a missionary God who has the heart for the gospel and the heart for the world. Mission is of God and about God. There are four elements that need to be noted regarding this fact: (a) **It is God who took the initiative.** While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2); (b) **It is God’s word of grace out of grace communicated.** It tells us about God who became man in Jesus Christ in order to save us. God’s grace tells us that in and through Jesus everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses (Acts 13:39); (c) **It is the crucified and the resurrected Christ proclaimed** as the Lord and Saviour of the world (Acts 13:23, 26, 32, 38); and (d) **It is the moment of the Holy Spirit,** who does not only call, but also directs (send) (Acts 13: 2, 4), and empowers human beings to participate in the *Missio Dei*⁷ as instruments in the hand of God in advancing his Kingdom on earth (Acts 1:8).

2.2 Christian mission is distinctively verbal

Acts 13 reminds us not to underestimate the power of words. It tells us that Christian mission is distinctively verbal⁸ in that it involves the verbal proclamation of the gospel, the *kerygma*. This verbal proclamation of the word has the element of public annunciation and it presupposes that there must be people called and sent for this task (messengers). This deserves special mention in our times where many of us have lost nerves when it comes to spoken ‘words’. Paul and Barnabas were called and sent to be the messengers of God among the Gentiles as recorded in Acts 13. And when they were presented with the opportunity to proclaim in the synagogue in Pisidian

7 Visser, 2003:230.

8 Löffler, 1975:24

9 The concept “*missio Dei*” has been used increasingly in missiological debates and literature in the twentieth century, and it refers to the mission of God. It was in this century where mission developed more and more in the direction toward a theocentric point of view in thoroughgoing Trinitarian perspective. The concept “*missio Dei*” should still receive primary attention also in the 21st century. Mission in such a time as this should also be understood as primarily the work of God. The Father sent his son Jesus to be the redeemer of man and to mediate between God and man. The Father and the Son sent the Spirit to apply the redemptive work of Christ and to assemble the church of God in the entire universe. Mission has its origin in the heart of God (1 John 4:9). The ground of mission is God’s agape (love) or his charis (mercy-love) (1 John 4:9). In the mission of God, God becomes not only the Sender, but also simultaneously the one who is sent. Mission is God giving up himself, his becoming man, his laying aside of his divine prerogatives and taking our humanity, his moving into the world, in his Son and Spirit.

Antioch, they seized the opportunity. This is clearly stated in the following words: “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak” (Acts 13:15). And as we continue to read from verse 16 forward, we find out that Paul grabbed the opportunity to communicate the word of God. One thing which is notable in Paul and Barnabas’s approach is that they made use of various forms of communication, namely: They (a) talked (entered into conversation = dialogue); (b) taught (lecture); and (c) preached. And the most interesting part of their communication is that they spoke with great assurance and boldness (Acts 13:46).

2.3 Christian mission involves human interaction

Whenever the Word of God is communicated, it also involves human interaction. In Pisidian Antioch, people who were in the synagogue had time to (a) **listen** and (b) **respond** to the communicated word. The response of the audience or hearers was two-sided. On one hand the hearers welcomed the word of God communicated to them, namely: (a) there were those who followed Paul and Barnabas and urged them to continue in the grace of God (Acts 13:42); (b) “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord” (Acts 13:48) and; (c) “And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). On the other hand the word was rejected. It met with opposition. There were Jews who were filled with jealousy and stood against not only the messengers but also the message. They stirred persecution against Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:45, 49). In the end they expelled these messengers of God from the region. This tells us that the proclamation of the gospel is a serious business. On one hand it brings life, and on the other hand it is a sign of judgment. It brings about the paradox of joy versus tension, and acceptance versus rejection. It is not an easy task, and does not need the faint-hearted who are not ready to be true witnesses of God on earth.

2.4 Christian mission is the moment of God's elect

Christian mission is the moment of God’s elect from among nations of the world. The fact that God predestined some to eternal life and some to eternal damnation does not give Christian missionaries any reason not to engage in mission. On the contrary, Acts 13 reminds us that those whom God has predestined come to faith when the Word is communicated. The communicated word is meant for both the Jews and the Gentiles. Paul pointed out categorically that the gospel is not only meant for the Jews in Acts 13:46, it is also meant for the uncircumcised, the Gentiles. Acts 13:47 says: “For this

is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” And indeed, when the Gentiles heard the Word of God, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord (Acts 13:48); and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. God has ordained that through the gospel proclamation, his elect from among nations of the world will be gathered.

3. Conversion in the witness of Acts 13

What can we make of conversion as reflected in the testimony of Acts 13? In my attempt to answer this question, I will focus primarily on the meaning and process of conversion as outlined in Acts 13.

3.1 The meaning of conversion in Acts 13

In the New Testament the verbs “ἐπιστρεφω” and “μετανοεω” are mostly used for “conversion”. Both describe the movement towards conversion but when these two words are put together, the first one means the positive turning to and the second one turning away from.¹⁰ This is clear from the following words: “**Repent, then, and turn to God**, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Paul reminded his audience that the call to conversion, in the New Testament, started with John the Baptist when he preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel (Acts 13:28). The challenge to repentance is a challenge to conversion to God. The word *conversion* itself means “turning” – and it represents a spiritual turn, a turning from sin to Christ. The turning from sin is called *repentance*, and the turning to Christ is called *faith* as outlined by Wayne Grudem.¹¹ These two elements of conversion are clearly articulated in Acts 13. The forgiveness of sins through Jesus is referred to in Acts 13:28. The foregoing reminds us that faith and repentance are different aspects of the act of coming to Christ for salvation and therefore they belong together. They constitute the message of salvation which every missionary must proclaim (Acts 13:26). The above-mentioned might tempt one to suggest that conversion in Acts 13 is only defined from anthropological and soteriological perspectives.¹² It sounds like emphasis is only on salvation of humanity which amounts to a pietistic understanding of conversion.¹³ But a careful reading of Acts 13 suggests that conversion is

10 It does not exclude service or deeds as we shall see in 3.1 below.

11 See Jongeneel, 1997:267; cf. Romans 10:10-21.

12 Rink, T. An interdisciplinary perspective on conversion. In *Missionalia*, 35:2. 2007, 21.

13 Grudem, W. *Systematic theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1994, 709.

also contextual. Acts 13:4-12 provides a detailed recording of an incident wherein Paul declared the Lordship of Christ by not only standing up against the false prophet Elymus and his exploits, but also pronouncing God's judgment against him. In his effort to bring the gospel to Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of the island called Paphos, Paul stood up against the social injustice of the Elymus who earned a living out of deceit – false prophecy. This, to my judgment, bears testimony to the social dimension of conversion. Paul's prophetic voice against the social ills of his time is more of a sign of the Kingdom of God. This understanding of conversion is clearly articulated by David Bosch¹⁴ in the following words:

Conversion is, however, not the joining of a community in order to procure "eternal salvation"; it is rather, a change in allegiance in which Christ is accepted as Lord and center of one's life. A Christian is not simply somebody who stands a better chance of being "saved", but a person who accepts the responsibility to serve God in this life and promote God's reign in all its forms. Conversion involves personal cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in order to become participant in the mighty works of God.

The call to engage in social responsibility is also reiterated by JH Bavinck when he emphatically asserted that 'one cannot use the word "salvation" without touching upon all aspects of human life'. He continued to draw attention of humanity towards social actions in the following words:

The Christian has this obligation too, namely, to fight the weaponless combat of the way of God. This combat is a war inside his own heart against the "old man," as the New Testament calls it; at the same time it is a struggle for improving social relations. He is a servant of Jesus Christ and knows that he must prove himself to be a man who has been touched by the love of Christ and who lives out of this love.¹⁵

3.2 The process of conversion

The meaning and process of conversion vary from one religious tradition to another and from one context to another. There is a clear distinction as to what conversion from another faith to Judaism and from Judaism and other faiths to Christianity means. Conversion among the Gentiles to

14 Visser, P. Heart for the gospel, heart for the world: The life and thought of a Reformed pioneer Missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck [1859 – 1964]. 2003, 230.

15 Kritzing, J.J., Meiring, P.G.J., & Saayman, W.A. On being witnesses. 1994, 26-28.

Judaism in Paul's days included among others instruction under a Rabbi, observance of the law (dietary laws and the commands of Torah), and initiation through circumcision.¹⁶ A deliberate study of Acts 13 provides us with certain nuances as to what it means to convert from Judaism and other faith traditions to Christianity. The author will therefore attempt to describe what the process of conversion within the Christian mission entails in the light of the witness of Acts 13. The witness of Acts 13 attests to the fact that conversion cannot simply be defined as a once-off event, but a process with both elements of being spontaneous and gradual. This process according to the witness of Acts 13 entails the following:

3.2.1 The encounter between a Christian missionary and people of other faiths

The process of conversion takes place within the context of the encounter between a Christian missionary with people of other faiths. Acts 13 provides a detailed description of the ordination of Paul and Barnabas as Christian missionaries with a special task of reaching out to the Gentiles. In their missionary approach, Paul and Barnabas targeted Jewish synagogues in different cities, namely: Salamis, Paphos, Perga, and Pisidian Antioch among others. They consciously, as led by the Holy Spirit, decided to make contacts with the Jews and devout converts to Judaism (proselytes).

3.2.2 The encounter between the gospel and people of other faiths

The process of conversion takes place within the context of the encounter between the gospel and people of other faiths. In their encounter with the Jews, the God-fearing Gentiles, and other Gentiles who were adherents of other religions, Paul and Barnabas seized the opportunity to communicate the gospel to them. The call to 'convert' by embracing Jesus as personal Saviour and Lord became more articulate – 'a message of salvation in and through Jesus Christ which calls for repentance'.

3.2.3 Decision making

The call to conversion in Christian mission is a process which also entails decision making. This element of the conversion process calls people of other faiths to intentionally respond to the communicate gospel. They are called to turn away from their sins and embrace Christ as their personal

16 Bosch, 488.

Saviour and Lord. The decision making process can either be positive or negative.¹⁷

3.2.4 *Initiation to the Christian faith*

The process of conversion entails the initiation stage into the Christian faith. Paul referred to the preaching of John the Baptist who preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. Baptism should be seen therefore as symbol of being initiated into the new life within the one body of Christ wherein the new convert belongs. Water baptism is a symbol of Spirit baptism as worked out by the Spirit when one is grafted into the body of Christ which is the *charisma* of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is therefore an indispensable initiative component of conversion.¹⁸

3.2.5 *New Life*

The call to ‘repent’ and ‘turn to God’ does not only entail ‘faith’ and ‘justification’, sanctification is also included. Conversion calls for a new life which depicts the joy of being forgiven and also being led by the indwelling Spirit of God in the convert’s life. This is clear in the following words: “And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). Converts from other faith traditions to Christianity must lead a life of thanksgiving as a way of appreciating what God in Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit did for them. In this way the mission of the church becomes more of a manifestation (though not yet complete) of the Kingdom of God, through proclamation as well as through social service and action.¹⁹

4. Implications for Christian mission among people of other faiths

The foregoing discussions about Christian mission and conversion in the witness of Acts 13 has implications for Christian mission among people of other faiths, namely:

- Christian mission among people of others faith is primarily God’s work as we have seen in the case of adherents of Judaism and the

17 Bavinck, 182-183.

18 A Gentile who entered the community as a full member was called a “proselyte” (Jeffers, J.S, 217 – 218). A proselyte is more of a Gentile who received full conversion to Judaism, whilst the concept “God-fearing” was used for those who showed significant alliance to Judaism, attracted by its monotheism, high moral standards, the sincerity of the Jews and their well-defined identity. The “God-fearers” are Gentiles who did not take the final step of asking for circumcision (Bosch, D. 1992:25).

19 See 2.3 above.

Gentiles in Acts 13. It was through the appointment of God that Paul and Barnabas were set apart specifically for the mission to the Gentiles – encountering and communicating the gospel of salvation to people of other faiths. The calling is from God;

- Every moment is a missionary moment, and therefore Christian missionaries should seize every opportunity to proclaim the gospel to people of other faiths when presented with it;
- Conversion is integral in Christian mission. Conversion of Gentiles (Lat: *conversion gentilium*), or the conversion of the infidels (Lat: *conversion infidelium*), is preparation for both church planting and the glorification and manifestation of God's grace²⁰;
- Conversion should be defined not only from soteriological and anthropological perspectives, it is also contextual in the sense that it takes place within a particular context – seeking to understand those people and their level of understanding of (conception about) God and the manner they must respond to him²¹;
- Conversion is a process which should enable Christian missionary to respect and have patience when dealing with people of other faiths. David Bosch's definition of mission as mediating salvation is relevant in this regard. He sees Christian involvement in the dialogue with other faiths as an adventure wherein missionaries are vulnerable, but at the same time open to guidance of the Spirit in the process. He summed up the foregoing in the following words²²:

This is not opting for antagonism, but for humility. It is, however, a bold humility – or a humble boldness. We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure sales-persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.

5. Conclusion

Conversion from Judaism and other faiths to Christianity as outlined in Acts 13, is a process which entails the encounter between the missionary with people of other faiths, the encounter between people of other faiths

20 Padilla, C.R. Mission between the times: Essays on the Kingdom. 1985, 192.

21 See Acts 17.

22. Bosch, 1992:489

with the gospel, conscious decision on the part of people of other faiths to embrace Christ as their Saviour and Lord by acknowledging and confessing their sins thereby seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with God which will result into a new life in Christ. It is a process which is not church-centered, but Kingdom focused – it allows the convert to seek and acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in every sphere of life. In Christ, all things hold together.