

Lydia's Story: Christian Conversion as Relational, Collaborative, and Invitational (Acts 16:11-15)¹

Jon Isaak,² *Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary*

“Change” or “transformation” is a topic that is quite fashionable these days. Most movies or novels narrate the transformation of a main character (e.g., *Bruce Almighty*, *Liar Liar*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, etc.). For most films we can expect that somebody is going to change as a result of circumstances, encounters, mentoring, or personal resolve. Dramas like these, whether in novel or in film, touch on the most basic aspect of being human—the potential and capacity for change. As the drama unfolds, we are encouraged to embrace change as we negotiate the challenges that our lives present.

Religious conversion, however, is a topic that is clouded with controversy in our western world—no doubt, for good reasons. We know of conversionist religions that tie some economic or personal advantage to conversion. Unfortunately, such exchanges also characterize some western foreign policy—those who “convert” to western style government are rewarded with foreign aid, while those who refuse, are penalized in some way.

In the June 30, 2003 edition of *Time* magazine, David van Biema wrote an article called “Missionaries under Cover: Growing Number of Evangelicals are trying to spread Christianity in Muslim lands.” He asks, “But is that what the world needs now?” The article explores the complexity of missionary work in Muslim countries. Van Biema retells a range of stories, from Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry, American missionaries who were imprisoned for their message of “conversion,” to Mennonite Central Committee workers Edward Miller and Steve Weaver whose mission practice focuses more on rebuilding food supply networks destroyed in the Iraq war. The war in Iraq has made missionary work in Muslim countries more complicated because Christianity is usually associated with western countries. Only a very perceptive Muslim will be able to make the distinction

between Christianity and Western domination—most will see them as the same.

So, does this mean that Christians should abandon the concept of conversion altogether, as the writer of the *Time* article suggests? I suggest that this need not be the case. However, it will take some major re-imagining to salvage the word “conversion” from the oppression associated with crusades, domination, supersessionism, and assimilation.

In order to recover the concept of “conversion” as an appropriate and healthy Christian practice, let us consider the story of Paul’s encounter with Lydia, the wealthy entrepreneur and dealer of purple cloth (Acts 16:11-15).

In Luke’s narration of this encounter, Paul and his companion, Silas, are traveling for the first time into Europe. They arrive in what is now known as Turkey and begin to share the good news of God’s salvation—inviting the people they meet to hear news of God’s Kingdom. For the early Christians, the good news was that Jesus’s resurrection meant that death no longer had the last word, that Jesus was God’s Messiah who had conquered the power of sin, evil, and death, and that by associating with him each one could find his or her true identity. This message was radical and threatening. It meant that things could no longer continue in a way that was “business as usual.” In view of the light that shone from the empty tomb, the new age had dawned. There was now a new perspective on old problems.

This is the reality that animated Paul and his colleagues to talk with anyone who would pass their worktable at the market. Perhaps while repairing a tent or a canvas bag, Paul might say something like, “Hey listen, God is on the move again in some extraordinary ways among us—people are experiencing alternatives to violence, communities are sharing so that the needs of all are addressed, and dividing walls are breaking down between race, culture, and gender! But there is much more, why don’t you stop by the home of Chloe after work, we’re having potluck and we’ll be able to talk further about what we’ve experienced and about what we’re finding in the Torah.”

Consider how Luke frames one particular incident just outside Phillipi. Note the way that Paul and his teammates conduct themselves. I believe their interactions with those they meet in Phillipi model in a concrete way what could be described as Christian conversion practice at its best.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:11-15, NRSV)

Luke is a masterful storyteller. He carefully and artfully casts the narrative with a purpose. While he aims to show that this interaction is routine, it is an interaction that throbs with what could be described as healthy conversion practice. Look with me at three characteristics of Paul and Silas's interaction with the people of Philippi.

First, their interaction was *relational*. On the Sabbath, Paul and his traveling partners went looking for what must have been a small gathering of Jews that met informally outside the city gate. Two things are important to understand here. 1) Philippi is in the *Diaspora*—this is a long way from the temple in Jerusalem and Jewish prayer groups like this would have been common. 2) Until about the year 85, Jewish Christians, like Paul, moved easily between synagogue and house church. It would have been common for these early Jewish Christians to pray on Saturday, the Sabbath, and then to gather the next day for potluck meal after work on Sunday, the first day of the week, to celebrate the resurrection.

Furthermore, what is noteworthy here is that the good news that Paul proclaimed was not simply a "load of content" to be dropped off in a "take it or leave it" fashion. Instead, the gospel message is intimately tied to the relational dimension of salvation itself. Luke is careful to note that Paul and his associates found the Jewish prayer group, sat down with them, and spoke with the women.

These actions are significant because they underscore the relational dimension of the Christian practice of calling for conversion. Not only were their methods relational, the message they presented was relational—they were representatives of a God who longs to participate with humanity to make things new. In the end, the story concludes with

Paul and Silas accepting the hospitality of Lydia, the wealthy entrepreneur, underscoring the mutuality and reciprocity of the relationship. It is truly “give-and-take.”

The Christian practice of calling to conversion is healthy when it is *relational* in its interaction and engagement with culture and people.

Some years ago there was an article in our local newspaper about a Holocaust survivor who after many years of rejecting God, has recently been able to believe again and in fact has become a Jewish rabbi. The line that caught my eye was the one where she speaks about the problem of pain and suffering—how can God be good and allow such pain? She has come to the conclusion that God does not cause evil but works with us to overcome evil. This woman who has experienced unspeakable pain and horror has been able to reframe these experiences theologically—not by attributing blame to one party or even to God, but by focusing on the presence of God which empowers the faithful to carry on the struggle.

Why is this reframing significant? Not only does it show that people engage in life-long, ongoing transformation; the rabbi’s story shows that God is relational and self-involving. This is as it should be because Yahweh is the God who joins people in their struggle against evil. Jesus is the primary example of this because in him the face of God is most clearly visible. In Jesus’s life and ministry we see the God who suffers and deals with evil, ultimately undoing it without coercion or violence. Now, this does not mean that we understand all the “reasons” or “causes” for the pain we experience. Instead, we are energized to keep moving forward convinced of God’s presence, inviting all to share in this relationship with the Master of the Universe.

While the relational dimension of faith may be fashionable, this is not why Christianity’s call to conversion should be relational. No. Christianity’s witness is relational because that is the image of God that emerges from the Christian Bible. Emmanuel means “God with us,” with us in the struggle of life until the end of the age.

Second, the text shows that the interaction between Paul and the people of Phillippi was *collaborative*. How does Luke identify Lydia? Religiously, Luke wants us to know that she worships God, but is not a Christian. Lydia is a seeker “listening” carefully to what Paul and his colleagues are saying about God’s final revelation in Jesus, the one who is victorious over death and makes it possible to imagine an alternative humanity. Note that according to Luke, God did not arrive

for the first time with these missionaries, Paul and Silas. God had already been at work in the world, particularly through Israel. What Jesus did was gather and call Israel back to its original mandate to bring life to the nations. Recall God's promise to Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I bless you ... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3).

The call to conversion is not about empire building. Instead, it announces and gives witness to what has already come, to what is visible in small, but significant ways, and to what is still to come. The call to conversion is very aware that the Reign of God is bigger than the church, that God has been at work long before the church arrived on the scene, and that some surprises are likely in order.

The Hebrew Bible testifies that long before Jesus, God had already begun to call a people. It was as if God had hung up a sign in the window that read, "Help Wanted." The responses of Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam, David, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, to name a few, make it clear that the People of God was already off to a good start. However, in the New Testament we read about how Jesus uniquely responded to the "Help Wanted" ad by gathering and focusing Israel in view of the coming Reign of God. Jesus moved that People one massive step closer to being what God had always intended for it—namely, to be a blessing to the world, inviting the world to experience life, wholeness, and peace—ultimately, to be instrumental in the transformation of all creation.

The Christian practice of calling to conversion is healthy when it is *collaborative* in its interaction and engagement with culture and people.

One of my friends specializes in community development. He works with communities up and down the San Joaquin valley in Central California. Whether it is a church or a group of farm workers, he helps them organize. In every case there is one basic line that he repeats, "Community building should be asset based and not need based." Asset based community development begins with the strengths and resources that are already present in persons and communities, taking a development approach rather than a rescue approach. Community builders look to build on and strengthen capacities, rather than fill deficiencies. Unfortunately, many community-building efforts are "need based." The consultant team comes in, determines what is needed, prescribes the solution, brings in outside resources, and does the job for the community. Usually, however, such efforts are

short-lived leaving the landscape littered with the shells of well-intentioned projects that are now abandoned or under used.

Again, while collaboration may now be politically correct, this is not why Christianity's call to conversion should be collaborative. No. Christian witness is collaborative because that is the image of God that emerges from the Christian Bible. God works together with people to make something good and beautiful.

Third, the interaction between Paul and the people of Phillipi was *invitational*. Not only are Paul and Silas relational and collaborative, they also have something to say! As a sign of what God is about, the Christian church does have a message to proclaim. The message is one of inviting people to find their true identity in God.

What does Paul say to these women? We are not told, but from the things we read of Paul elsewhere, it would be reasonable to assume that he tells them about finding one's true identity as a child of God, by being included in the body of the Risen Lord. In other words, this is an invitation to abandon rebellion and the suffocating preoccupation with prestige, possessions, and power—the things that cause us to become all tangled up in ourselves. The gospel invitation is still the same; it is one of liberation from bondage and of finding our name as God's beloved.

Luke deliberately lets us know that Lydia is independent and an entrepreneur. He takes special care to mention that she is a person who has *achieved* a status in her society that puts her on par with a male householder. How do we know? Luke carefully points out that she is known for the products she sells and that she is known as the head of a household.

Lydia was like other women in the early church who had achieved a certain status in society but were still marginalized by society. These women entrepreneurs found in the Christian gospel a way to have their identity *affirmed* as fully human participants in God's new emerging society. This was attractive, though probably threatening to the status quo. The Christian gospel offered these entrepreneurial women identity affirmation to go along with their achieved status. Paul invited these marginalized women of means to join him in God's mission of helping others know who they really are. And so Lydia is baptized, she and her household.

The Christian practice of calling to conversion is healthy when it is *invitational* in its interaction and engagement with culture and people.

Madeleine L'Engle develops the concept of invitation in a powerful children's novel called, *A Wind in the Door*. In the story, Meg a teenage girl is in dialogue with an angel called *Proginoskes*, whom she affectionately calls *Progo*. Meg learns that she is what is called a "Namer" and that she is apprenticed to *Progo*, an experienced Namer. *Progo* has been sent to help her and to teach her what a Namer does. It is complicated by the fact that in order to help save her dying brother, Meg must pass three tests to defeat the *Echthroi*, the "enemies" who are oppressing her brother and the world.

Progo tells her, "War and hate are the business [of the Echthroi], and one of their chief weapons is un-Naming—making people not know who they are. If someone knows who he is, really knows, then he doesn't need to hate. That's why we still need Namers, because there are places throughout the universe like your planet Earth. When everyone is really and truly Named, then the Echthroi will be vanquished" (p. 98).

Progo goes on to explain to Meg that only tough, self-giving love can help people know who they are. He says, "You're full of love, Meg, but you don't know how to stay within it when it's not easy" (p. 100). The book goes on to narrate Meg's journey to do just this, to stay within love when it is not easy.

Being a Namer means continually helping others to understand who they really are. Paul is a Namer, inviting Lydia and the others to recognize who they really are!

Christianity's call to conversion is invitational not because it is culturally appropriate. No. Christian witness is invitational because that is the image of God that emerges from the Christian Bible. God works with human beings—inviting all to recognize their Name as God's beloved. In this way, all are invited to find their true identity in the people of God that is taking shape in small, but significant ways—imagining new possibilities in the face of old problems that seem so hopeless.

The Word of the Lord that is released by this scripture lesson is that God's call is indeed relational, collaborative, and invitational. These three characteristics, evident in Paul's interaction with Lydia,

remind us of the best of Christianity's radical call to conversion. Recovering God's call to conversion is essential to healthy Christian practice. May the promise of God's Spirit among us continue to shape us to know who we truly are and thereby to help others know who they truly are.

Notes

1. Jon Isaak is Associate Professor of New Testament at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California, where he has taught since 1998. His doctoral dissertation, supervised by Dr. Wisse, was published as *Situating the Letter to the Hebrews in Early Christian History* (SBEC 53; Lewiston N.Y.: Mellen, 2002).

2. Professor Frederik Wisse was my *Doktorvater* during my studies at the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University (1995–1998). What I appreciated most about Dr. Wisse was the way in which he combined thoroughgoing historical study of earliest Christianity as a scholar and provocative Christian preaching as a practitioner of Christianity. His book of sermons, *Free of Charge*, provides ample evidence for both of these qualities. What follows is a revised version of a sermon that I preached at College Community Church, Mennonite Brethren in Clovis, California on July 13, 2003. I offer it as a tribute to Professor Wisse in gratitude for his contribution to New Testament scholarship and to Christian formation. Thanks, Fred, for your inspiration; you have shaped both my teaching and my preaching!