CONVERSION TO PAUL’S GOSPEL

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For some time it has been pointed out that Paul’s preaching, particularly the Lukan version presented in the book of Acts, shares some features with the ancient accounts of conversion to philosophy. The person who was most perceptive in exploring the similarities and differences between Christian and pagan philosophic conversion was Arthur Darby Nock, Everett Ferguson’s and my mentor, whom Ferguson also served as assistant in instruction. Werner Jaeger, also at Harvard at the time, held a similar view, and it is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Ferguson, adducing the example of Lucian of Samosata’s Nigrinus, has held that “conversion to philosophy . . . was the nearest parallel to Christian conversion.” This view has been widely, but not universally, held.

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I gave some attention to Luke’s accounts of conversion in an article published in *The Second Century*, the journal founded and edited by Everett Ferguson, and also briefly dealt elsewhere with conversion in Paul’s writings and the similarities between Paul’s and the philosophers’ view of conversion. Our honoree will recognize our teacher’s influence, to which he also is still clearly captive, as I now continue to try to get it right by dealing with one dimension of the phenomenon in Paul’s ministry. My earlier efforts in dealing with Paul’s Thessalonian converts have primarily been concerned with the immediate consequences of their conversion. Here I wish to concentrate on the conversion experience itself. While taking brief notice of similarities to other descriptions of conversion, I here focus on Paul. In dealing with similarities and differences, I am reminded of the comment by Yogi Berra Jr., who, in response to a remark that his malapropisms were similar to those of his father, replied, “Yes, but our similarities are different.”

With some exceptions, according to Acts people converted in response to preaching, and they did so instantaneously. The preaching made use of proofs from prophecy and adapted traditions borrowed from hellenistic-Jewish propaganda and popular philosophy. The impression left is that the inherent persuasiveness of the preaching brought about conversion. The content of the preaching is always Jesus, and its aim is repentance of sins and conversion (Luke 24:46–49). For the Jews in

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