



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 4.11 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Bondage of the Will

Because of original sin human beings by nature cannot choose to do anything good in the sight of God. Natural man has no free will to choose good or to do good. When God looked at the human race in the years before the Genesis flood, **“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”** (Genesis 6:5). Of course, there were some persons, such as Enoch and Noah, who had been brought to faith in the promise of a Savior by the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel (Genesis 3:15). These few persons **“found grace in the eyes of the LORD”** (Genesis 6:8).

The prophet Ezekiel described the natural heart of man as a **“stony heart”** or a **“heart of stone”** (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). Jesus summed up the problem by saying: **“A bad tree bears bad fruit”** (Matthew 7:17). The apostle Paul declared: **“The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God”** (Romans 8:7-8).

Regarding God, the only thing man is able to conceive is that he must do something to make God show favor to him. For this reason, all man-made religions lay the burden on man to come up with some kind thought or action that will satisfy God and move God to remove His punishment from us and reward us for the good things we do. But God’s standards are much higher than any human being can hope to fulfill. Even God’s own chosen people, the Jews, imagined that they could please God by obeying the laws God gave them. Their own teachers even added many regulations in an attempt to please God. They did not realize that the purpose of God’s law was not to give them a way to eternal life, but to show them their inability to please God by their works. Their inability to perfectly follow the law was meant to lead them to seek refuge in God’s promise of a Savior. The apostle Paul himself had at one time attempted to earn God’s favor by keeping the law. But after his conversion he recognized the futility of trying to keep the law and described the problem of the Jews in this way: **“I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God”** (Romans 10:2-3).

Since human beings are by nature **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1) they are unable to do anything at all to remove the just condemnation of God and the punishment their sin deserves. Even when God, in His grace, comes to them with the Good News of Jesus and the salvation He worked out for them, they are not at all able even to cooperate with God in bringing themselves to faith in Christ. In other words, natural man has no free will to choose to do good or to choose to believe God’s promise of a Savior. Just as a person who is physically dead can do nothing to bring himself back to life, so also a person who is spiritually dead can do nothing to give himself spiritual life. He cannot even cooperate with God to bring about a new spiritual life. Conversion is entirely a work of God, not of man. The creation of faith in Christ in a person’s heart is a work of God, not a choice or a decision of man.

Jesus and His apostles stressed this truth repeatedly, because humans, because of their sinful flesh, like to give some credit to themselves for their new spiritual life. Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh,**

and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit...You must be born again” (John 3:3-7). We do not give ourselves this new birth; the Holy Spirit gives us this most necessary new birth.

What Paul said about this agrees with his Lord and Savior: **“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”** (1 Corinthians 12:3). Our coming to faith in Jesus is entirely the work of God, as it is written: **“God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”** (Ephesians 2:4-5). We were dead in sins; God made us alive. See also Colossians 2:13.

The creation of light on the first day of creation is like the creation of the light of faith in Christ in a human being dead in sins. **“For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”** (2 Corinthians 4:6). Even the desire to believe in Jesus is a work of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi: **“It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure”** (Philippians 2:13). The entire work of conversion must be ascribed to God alone. Natural man does not have a free will to choose to believe in Jesus.

Although the teaching of the bondage of the will in spiritual matters is clearly presented in Scripture, this has been a hotly contested teaching in the history of the Christian Church. Pelagius troubled believers with his notion that a man, by nature, is able to keep God’s commandments and is able to choose to believe in Jesus. The church father, Augustine, contended against this false teaching and stressed the Bible’s teaching that we are saved by grace alone. God does it all; we cannot even freely cooperate with God to bring about that first spark of faith in Christ. Nevertheless, many Bible students and teachers continue to teach that conversion is a joint project carried out partly by God and partly by man. This is sometimes presented like this: God has done His part by bringing the good news of Jesus to you; now you must do your part and make the decision to believe in Him. This is sometimes called “decision theology.” But even though a majority of Christian teachers and missionaries may follow this method, it is clearly contrary to the Word of God. Martin Luther contended in his time for the teaching of salvation by grace alone, and we must do the same today.

Questions

1. What is meant by the bondage of the will?
2. Who were the only ones who could do good in the eyes of God in the days before the Genesis flood?
3. How did the prophet Ezekiel describe the heart of natural man?
4. How do men, by nature think, they can gain the favor of God?
5. What are some man-made religions that teach salvation by works or rituals?
6. Why are we, by nature, unable to cooperate with God in our own conversion?
7. What are some of the Bible passages that ascribe conversion entirely to God?
8. Why is the creation of light in the beginning a good picture of conversion?
9. What is decision theology, and how is it contrary to the Word of God?
10. Why is decision theology dangerous for the Christian missionary?
11. What is the right way to bring the Gospel of Christ to unbelievers?
12. If you can, name some missionaries in your locale that use of decision theology in their work.