



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.1 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

### Conversion as Calling

Up to now we have considered mostly the work of God the Father and God the Son. But the work of the Holy Spirit is also necessary for our salvation. Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: “Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe in Him and receive Him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by His sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which He has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure, this redemption” (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 436).

The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing sinners to faith in Jesus Christ can be called conversion, which is the transition of a person from the state of unbelief into the state of faith in Christ. Other terms for the Holy Spirit’s work of conversion are calling, regenerating, vivifying, quickening, illuminating, enlightening, and awaking. The Bible and our Lutheran confessions use all of these terms. The Holy Spirit works through Law and Gospel to bring sinners to repentance.

The terms “call” and “calling” sometimes refer to the Holy Spirit’s invitation to turn to Christ and trust in Him for salvation. The Holy Spirit’s invitation is always a serious invitation. In other words, the Holy Spirit is extending to us the gift of forgiveness because of Christ’s work and seriously and earnestly wants us to accept this invitation. **“The Lord...is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9). **“God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”** (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Just as God the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world, and just as God the Son suffered and died for all sinners on the cross, so the Holy Spirit invites all sinners to believe in Him and strives earnestly to bring all sinners to faith in Christ through the Gospel.

Followers of John Calvin generally teach that even though the invitation goes out to all, the Holy Spirit actually intends to bring only some to faith, even as they teach that Jesus did not die for all sinners, but only for some whom He intended to bring to faith. In that case, however, God would be deceiving us, pretending to invite all, but secretly intending only to save some. But listen to Isaiah’s invitation: **“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat... Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live”** (Isaiah 55:1-3). The prophet Ezekiel likewise calls out: **“As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways!”** (Ezekiel 33:11). Surely Jesus Himself was serious in His invitation to all: **“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”** (Matthew 11:28). **“If anyone thirsts, let Him come to Me and drink”** (John 7:37).

The reason that some do not accept the invitation has nothing to do with God’s call or the Lord’s desire to save all, but with those who reject the call. Listen to Jesus again: **“How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”** (Matthew 23:37). In Jesus’ parables of the wedding dinner and the great supper, the reason that some

did not enjoy these meals was not the desire of the hosts nor their invitations, but the refusal on the part of those invited. **“They all with one accord began to make excuses”** (Luke 14:18). **“Those who were invited to the wedding...were not willing to come”** (Matthew 22:3).

In the letters of the apostles Paul and Peter, the words “call” and “calling” include both the invitation and the persuasion needed to bring about an acceptance of the invitation. When we say that the Holy Spirit has “called” us by the Gospel, we mean that He has brought the Gospel to us so that we know what it is and accept it. That is, we were formerly unbelievers, but now by the Holy Spirit’s work in us through the Gospel, we are believers in Christ. Paul writes to the Christians in Thessalonica: **“He called you by our Gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (2 Thessalonians 2:14). The Holy Spirit uses the truth of the Gospel to bring about **“belief in the truth”** (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul wrote to his young associate Timothy: **“God...saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace”** (2 Timothy 1:8-9). The apostle Peter wrote to his readers: He **“called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9).

### Questions

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1. In what way is the work of the Holy Spirit necessary for our salvation?
2. What is the meaning of the word “conversion”?
3. How many persons does God want to bring to faith in Jesus?
4. What false teaching is taught by Calvinists concerning God’s invitation?
5. Give Bible proof that God wants all people to be saved.
6. Whose fault is it that some people hear the truth but reject it?
7. What do Jesus’ two parables of the wedding dinner and the great supper teach us about God’s invitation?
8. What meaning is included in the word “call” when it is used by Peter and John?
9. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel?