



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.5 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Conversion as Turning or Changing Direction

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament picture the change from unbelief to faith in Christ as a turning or change in direction. It is a turning away from sin and a turning towards God that is brought about by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God – the Law prepares for the change and the Gospel is the Holy Spirit's instrument of conversion or means of grace.

The necessity of turning away from evil is brought out by the prophet Jeremiah. As a spokesman for the Lord he says: **"If that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it"** (Jeremiah 18:8). False teachers are condemned because they make no attempt to use God's Word to turn the people away from their evil ways. God says through Jeremiah: **"I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings"** (Jeremiah 23:21-22). But even true prophets who use God's Word correctly will not succeed in turning or converting all their listeners. God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel: **"If you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul"** (Ezekiel 3:19). True teachers use the means God has provided for bringing about conversion, but they are not at fault if the people do not listen to them.

Throughout their history the Israelites often fell away from their God and needed to have their direction reversed. They needed to turn back to their God. Without that turning they were doomed to destruction. Moses encouraged the people to turn back to God in times when God was sending judgments on them because of their sins. He told them: **"When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the LORD your God and obey His voice (for the LORD your God is a merciful God), He will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them"** (Deuteronomy 4:30-31).

The prophet Samuel was a faithful teacher of God's people, and the people responded to his call for conversion (or changing direction). He said to them: **"If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines."** The response: **"So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only"** (1 Samuel 7:3-4). The result was a great victory commemorated by the stone called Ebenezer (Stone of Help). Many years later, the faithful king Hezekiah assured his people: **"The LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn His face from you if you return to Him"** (2 Chronicles 30:9).

As we begin to examine the New Testament for its teaching on conversion, we find John the Baptist to be a faithful preacher of repentance and conversion. Even before John was born, the angel Gabriel told his father Zacharias: **"He (John the Baptist) will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"** (Luke 1:16-17).

It is a great privilege to be used by God to turn someone from his sin and back to God. Jesus' brother James writes: **"Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins"** (James 5:19-20).

After our Lord Jesus completed His work of redeeming the world, He sent His followers out into the world to use His Gospel to bring about the conversion of all people everywhere. This work began among the Jewish people first. Peter was Jesus' chosen apostle to bring the Gospel to the Jews. So we find Peter at the temple in Jerusalem, calling out to his people: **"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out"** (Acts 3:19). A bit later Peter was enabled by the Lord to heal a bedridden man named Aeneas of the town of Lydda, and in that connection **"all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord"** (Acts 9:35).

Soon Christians were bringing God's Word to the residents of the important city of Antioch in Syria. They **"spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord"** (Acts 11:20-21). The Pharisee Saul himself was converted and became Paul, a Gospel missionary to the non-Jews (the Gentiles), saying to them: We **"preach to you that you should turn from these useless things (their idolatry) to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them"** (Acts 14:15). Paul recognized that he was sent to the Gentiles so **"that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance"** (Acts 26:20). Paul accomplished his mission in many of the cities and villages of the Roman Empire. For example, he wrote to his converts in Thessalonica: **"You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come"** (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

Conversion involves a complete turn-around. Peter wrote to his readers: **"You were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"** (1 Peter 2:25). Jesus insisted that such a turn-around was altogether necessary: **"Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven"** (Matthew 18:3).

There is no neutral position between unbelief and faith in Christ. A person is either a believer or an unbeliever. In other words, conversion is a matter of a moment – it is instantaneous. That is, a person may be an unbeliever at 4:00 p.m. and be converted to faith in Christ by 4:01. At that moment the change in direction occurs. For this reason, some teachers have taught that every Christian should be able to specify the exact moment of his conversion. But that is usually not possible, nor is it necessary to know. Jesus said to Nicodemus: **"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit"** (John 3:8). The workings of the Holy Spirit are as mysterious as the workings of the wind.

As long as a person is an unbeliever, he is **"under law"** (Romans 6:14). That is, God's wrath hangs over his head because of his sin. For it is written: **"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"** (John 3:36). The believer in Christ, on the other hand, is **"under grace"** (Romans 6:14). He has escaped from the wrath of God through trust in what Jesus has done for him. It is grace, because it is God's undeserved gift to him. **"The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 6:23). If it is a gift, it is grace. The believers in Christ can say with Paul: **"Now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter"** (Romans 7:6).

Even though conversion itself is instantaneous, there may be a shorter or longer time of preparation during which God is making us more aware of our sins and a need for something different and better in our lives by means of events in our lives or encounters with Christians or the reminders of God's law in our conscience or through hearing His Word.

Questions

1. In what way does conversion involve a change of directions?
2. In what way were the false teachers failing in the days of Jeremiah?
3. What hope did Moses hold out to the Israelites when they were being punished for their sins?
4. What was the special task given to John the Baptist?
5. What did the apostles Peter and Paul teach about conversion?
6. Why is it true that conversion is instantaneous?
7. Why is it not necessary for a person to specify the exact moment of his conversion?
8. What is the difference between being under law and being under grace?
9. What can you recount about your own conversion?