



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.6 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Conversion as a Work of God Alone

Since no one who is dead in sins can bring himself to spiritual life, conversion has to be the work of God alone, without any cooperation from the person who is converted. The prophet Jeremiah puts these words into the mouth of the Israelites: **“Restore me, and I will return, for You are the LORD my God”** (Jeremiah 31:18). God is the one who does the restoring.

John says in his Gospel that **“children of God”** are born **“of God”** (John 1:12-13). Jesus Himself said: **“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him”** (John 6:44). Just as a magnet draws particles to itself, so the Father draws or attracts people to Jesus. Because it was a hard saying for those who were following Jesus, He repeated it once more: **“No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father”** (John 6:65).

When the book of Acts recounts the conversion experiences of the Christians, it always gives full credit to God for their conversion. When Peter told of how Cornelius and his family became believers in Jesus, his listeners **“glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’”** (Acts 11:18). When Paul and Barnabas reported on their first mission journey, **“they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles”** (Acts 14:27).

The apostle Paul emphasized that conversion is a work of God. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”** (1 Corinthians 12:3). To the Christians in Ephesus he wrote: **“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). Even the desiring to believe is already a work of the Holy Spirit, something we are unable to do, for it is written: **“It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure”** (Philippians 2:13). Through His Word God changes the unwilling one into a willing one.

It is true that God uses human agents to administer the Gospel Word and the Gospel sacraments, for this is the way God has chosen to bring about conversion. **“It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe”** (1 Corinthians 1:21), for **“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”** (Romans 10:17). The Old Testament prophets repeated God’s promises of the Messiah, and in so doing brought about faith that God would provide a Savior. Jesus’ apostles were united in preaching the Good News of Christ, which Paul summarized with the words: **“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and...He was buried, and...He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures”** (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Of this Gospel Paul said: **“Whether it was I, or they (the other apostles), so we preach and so you believed”** (1 Corinthians 15:11). **“We preach Christ crucified”** (1 Corinthians 1:23), said Paul. But it is God alone who must get all the credit for the converting.

Since God must get all the credit for conversion, John Calvin and his adherents drew the logical conclusion that non-conversion also must be attributed to God. But such a notion is directly contrary to God’s Word. God’s Word teaches us that God wants all persons to be saved, that Jesus died for all persons, and that the Holy Spirit is earnest in inviting all sinners to take refuge in Christ. When a sinner is not converted, the fault is not God’s fault. The fault is entirely the sinner’s own fault, as the Bible teaches in many places.

Listen to Jesus as He addresses the city of Jerusalem with these words: **“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). So also Stephen attributed the refusal of the Jews to receive Christ, not to a lack of love or interest in saving them on the part of God, but to their own stubbornness, saying to them: **“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you”** (Acts 7:51). When the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia opposed the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus by Paul and Barnabas, they said to them: **“It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first, but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles”** (Acts 13:46).

The prophet Isaiah compared God’s rebellious people to a vineyard that failed to produce good grapes. The man who planted the vineyard did not take the blame for the poor grapes. He said: **“What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?”** (Isaiah 5:4). God does not take the blame for the rejection of His people. Through His servant Jeremiah God said to the people: **“Although I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, you did not obey Me. I have also sent to you all My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them... But you have not inclined your ear, nor obeyed Me”** (Jeremiah 35:14-15).

Sometimes conversion is wrongly thought to be a cooperative effort between God and man. Some teachers have wrongly said that God begins the effort, and then man chooses to cooperate of his own free will. Others have said that man makes a move toward God, and then God helps him along until he is converted. Some have even maintained that man is able to make a choice to obey God and believe in Him without any special help from God at all. All of these teachings are contrary to God’s Word. God’s Word clearly teaches that when a person is converted, God must get all the credit for bringing him to faith in Christ. On the other hand, when a person rejects the Gospel of Christ, it is his own fault.

Since God’s teaching on this point does not seem logical to the human mind, false teachers have tried to correct God’s teaching in one of two ways. John Calvin and his adherents claim that God must be credited with both the salvation of sinners and their damnation. They teach that God from eternity chose some sinners to be saved and chose other sinners to be damned. Jesus then died only for the elect, who were those chosen to be saved. The Holy Spirit tries to save only those God has chosen, whereas God has chosen to reject the others.

On the other hand, Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, and many others have maintained that man has a free will either to accept Christ or to reject Him. This also is a denial of the Bible’s teaching, for since man is by nature dead in sins, there is no way he can contribute anything to his own conversion. He does not have a free will to choose to believe in Christ. His coming to faith in Christ is entirely the work of God, not his own work, as without God, we can do nothing. This is the meaning of the word “grace,” namely, that we are saved entirely by the working of God, not at all by our own efforts.

Even Martin Luther’s associate, Philip Melancthon, the chief author of the *Augsburg Confession*, was misled in his later years and taught that there are three causes for conversion: the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and man’s assenting will. The first two are correct, but the third one is contrary to the Word of God and it in fact negates the concept of salvation by grace.

Many missionaries, evangelists, and pastors in our time are Arminians. They teach the cooperation of the sinner in his own conversion. This is sometimes called “decision theology,” because salvation is presented as an offer from God, which the listener can decide or make a decision either to accept or reject. But the fact is that sinners can only decide to reject. It is God alone who, through the Gospel, can change a person from rejection to acceptance. A person who is dead in sins has no power at all to make a decision for Christ, and thus no one cannot cooperate in their own conversion.

There have been controversies among American Lutherans on the doctrine of conversion. The Church of the Lutheran Confession subscribes to the *Brief Statement* of 1932, which includes a long section

on the doctrine of conversion. Here are some excerpts from the *Brief Statement*:

Faith in the Gospel, or conversion to God, is neither wholly nor in the least part the work of man, but the work of God's grace and almighty power alone...

We reject every kind of synergism, that is, the doctrine that conversion is wrought not by the grace and power of God alone, but in part also by the cooperation of man himself, by man's right conduct, his right attitude, his right self-determination, his lesser guilt or less evil conduct as compared with others, his refraining from willful resistance, or anything else whereby man's conversion and salvation is taken out of the gracious hands of God and made to depend on what man does or leaves undone...

We reject also the Calvinistic perversion of the doctrine of conversion, that is, the doctrine that God does not desire to convert and save all hearers of the Word, but only a portion of them...

From Scripture we know only this: A man owes his conversion and salvation, not to any lesser guilt or better conduct on his part, but solely to the grace of God. But any man's non-conversion is due to himself alone; it is the result of his obstinate resistance against the converting operation of the Holy Ghost.

Questions

1. Why is it impossible for sinful man to cooperate in his own conversion?
2. Prove from Scripture that God alone must get the credit for our conversion.
3. What does the Holy Spirit use to bring sinners to faith in Christ?
4. Whom does the Holy Spirit use to bring sinners to faith in Christ?
5. What is the Gospel of Jesus Christ (give a brief summary of the Gospel message)?
6. What is the cause of a person's failure to believe in Christ?
7. What is the cause of a person's coming to faith in Christ?
8. What is wrong with the teaching of Calvinism concerning conversion?
9. What is wrong with the teaching of Arminianism concerning conversion?
10. Which is the greater danger in your locale?
11. What is wrong with Melancthon's presentation on conversion?
12. Summarize what the Bible teaches concerning conversion in your own words.