

# **The Doctrine of Conversion**

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[This essay was the 3rd of 6 essays on "The Common Confession" as read to the W.E.L. Synod Convention of 1951.]

A study of the doctrine of Conversion, with the limited scope, as it applies to the Common Confession, will of necessity answer three questions.

1. What does the Bible teach concerning Conversion?
2. What have the synods forming the Synodical Conference on the one hand and the synods forming the A.L.C. on the other hand been teaching concerning the doctrine of Conversion?
3. Does the article on Conversion as found in the Common Confession resolve the conflicting teachings between the Synodical Conference and the American Lutheran Church?

Man was created in the image of God. This means that man not only was without sin, but man possessed true righteousness and holiness. The will of man was in complete and perfect harmony with the holy will of God. Then sin entered the world through Satan. Man accepted sin with the disastrous result that man lost the image of God. By nature man is now spiritually dead (Eph 2:1). He is spiritually blind so that he loves darkness more than light (Jn 3:19; 1 Cor 2:14). Yes, even more, he is an enemy of God who opposes and hates God, His will and His Word. But it is not the will of God that man should remain in such a lost condition. It is the good and gracious will of God that the image of God, lost by man's fall into sin, should again be restored unto man. That this might be done, God promised and then "when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Ga 4:5,6).

Here in His Son, Jesus Christ, "the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men" (Tit 2:11). The invitation and promise stands "whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). The conditions of man's heart and mind under sin is such that man cannot by his own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ nor come to him. Although salvation is there for him, and although the invitation is extended to him to come and share in the blessed fruits of Christ's redemption, it is not within his own Power to accept Christ in faith. If the lost image of God is to be restored to man, if man is to accept Christ in faith, it is then necessary that man be converted to God. Man's will and heart must be changed. He must become a new creature. This is entirely God's work. God converts the sinner. The sinner who is an enemy of God, who is dead in trespasses and sins, has neither the will nor the power to convert himself. The Formula of Concord states: "God's Word testifies that the intellect, heart, and will of the natural, unregenerate man in divine things are not only turned entirely away from God, but also turned and perverted against God to every evil, also, that he is not only weak, incapable, unfit, and dead to good, but also is so lamentably perverted, infected, and corrupted by original sin that he is entirely evil, perverse, and hostile to God by his disposition and nature, and that he is exceedingly strong, alive, and active with respect to everything that is displeasing and contrary to God." God alone converts the sinner. This he does by having the Holy Spirit work saving faith in the heart of the sinner through the means of Grace. Man himself neither can nor does contribute anything toward his own conversion. Man does not assist in his own conversion even to this extent that he cooperates with God in bringing about his conversion. In conversion, man is entirely passive. He is acted upon. Conversion is entirely a gift of God's grace. Scripture is explicitly clear that the only causes of man's conversion are the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. The same power that created natural light out of darkness and raised Christ from the dead converts the sinner by giving him a saving faith (2 Cor 4:6).

In the development of the history of the various Lutheran synods forming the Synodical Conference on the one hand and the American Lutheran Church on the other hand, the doctrine of conversion has always been a point of controversy. Regarding the necessity of conversion there has been no argument. The whole

controversy rests upon the nature of conversion. Here no agreement has been reached to this day although Scripture speaks unequivocally clear on the matter. The synods forming the Synodical Conference, as in all other doctrines, so in the doctrine of conversion, taught exactly what God's Word teaches; no less but also no more, no matter how great a mystery this leaves unsolved. All these years they have been speaking where Scripture speaks and have been silent where Scripture is silent. God has not asked us to answer questions which He Himself leaves unanswered. No matter how great a question the doctrine of conversion as taught in the Bible leaves unanswered to our human minds, the attitude and approach of the Synodical Conference to God's Word has been the one which the Lord Himself requires of all His children: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). And "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Is 66:2).

If Scripture teaches the total depravity of man, and if Scripture teaches that God in His saving grace earnestly and sincerely desires and seeks the salvation of all men, and Scripture does teach both, then the question naturally arises: why only some and not all are saved (*cur alii prae aliis?*). This is a mystery that Scripture does not answer. It belongs to the hidden wisdom of God and therefore we do not speculate about it. The Ohio and Iowa Synods also taught that man's conversion was entirely due to the grace of God. But they limited this grace. They taught that it was effective only in those who offered natural resistance to God's grace, while it was ineffective in those who offered willful resistance. The Word of God makes no such distinction therefore the Synodical Conference made no such distinction. In spite of the unsolved mystery that remains, the Synodical Conference simply taught that conversion is the effect of God's divine grace overcoming ALL resistance in man. Although their terminology is different today, the old Ohio and Iowa beliefs remain the same. They have never been retracted. These are the beliefs that have been adopted into the A.L.C. They seek to give a reasonable explanation why some are saved while others are lost. They solve the mystery for themselves by teaching a two-fold resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit, natural resistance and willful resistance. In an article published in 1872 Dr. Fritschel says: "That God wants to save the ones as well as the others, that He earnestly endeavors to take away the resistance from the ones as well as the others, but that by some this gracious purpose is frustrated because they stubbornly and willfully resist the grace offered to them, whereas in others God's work is accomplished because they do not willfully resist but let God's work be done on themselves" (Monatsheft 187, p. 99). In these words the author means to say that the will of man can cooperate with the Holy Spirit in his own conversion, not by his natural powers but by a certain prevenient grace and power that is communicated to man by the Holy Spirit. If God's work is accomplished because, "they do not willfully resist, but let God's work be done on themselves," then man is assisting God in his own conversion. This certainly is synergism. If on the one hand, a certain prevenient grace is communicated unto man so that he becomes spiritually alive enough no longer to resist but to accept the saving grace that God extends to him, that man is converted and is no longer spiritually dead.

And yet the Ohio Synod continued to hold and to teach this position of two kinds of resistance and conduct in man toward the saving grace of God. In 1885 the following statement appeared in its Kirchenzeitung: "After God has done all that is necessary for the conversion and salvation of all men, it depends to a great extent, yea we may boldly say everything depends on the conduct of man over against the grace of God whether he lets the grace operate on himself which he can do by the strength inherent in him or whether in spite of it he willfully thrusts it away" (Ohio Lutheran Kirchenzeitung, May 15, 1885, p. 76). (Quoted by Bente.)

And in the Seebald Theses Dr. Fritschel writes: "Hence, the eternal lot of man does not depend upon unconditional decree of an electional grace operating irresistibly, regardless of the different conduct of man, but the different conduct of man over against the offered grace is indeed to be taken into consideration.' Again this is plan synergism, and yet this same thesis attacks and condemns the position of the Synodical Conference which finds the conversion of man solely in the secret unfathomable will of God, "as being essentially one with the Calvinistic doctrine of an absolute predestination. So also Dr. Stellhorn has written: "It is unchristian and heathenish to say that the actual obtaining of salvation procured and meant by God for all men depends in no respect on the conduct of man over against the grace of God but in every respect on God alone."

The teaching of synergism in these official statements was so apparent that it could not be denied. A new theory was therefore taught in which these expressions which teach synergism were no longer used or were at least modified. In their newer statements they ascribe the whole conversion entirely and exclusively to the Grace of God without any cooperation on the part of man. They say that man can contribute nothing toward his own conversion. He cannot prepare or make himself fit for it. They say that he can do nothing but resist the divine grace of God.

The language in the Chicago Theses setting forth the doctrine of Conversion at once seemed to give the general impression and satisfaction that Iowa and Ohio had now given up their old position and that complete unity in this doctrine had been accomplished. But Dr. George Fritschel, one of the authors of these theses definitely stated that the expressions are meant in the old Iowan sense as the doctrine of Conversion is stated in the Seebald Theses of 1880. Of these Seebald Theses Dr. Fritschel stated: "That is the doctrine to which we Iowans have pledged ourselves at ordination. Another doctrine of Iowa we do not know. And that this is the doctrine of Iowa is shown by the Chicago Theses that are nothing else but a mode of stating this good old doctrine under a certain aspect though not in our phrases. But of what consequence are words and phrases as compared with the subject matter? The truth can be expressed in all kinds of phrases." It has therefore been correctly stated by others, "that the difference between the earlier and the later way to present their tenets actually lies more in the expressions than in their ideas will become apparent by comparison of both" (Pastor John Bunger).

So the sense and meaning of the doctrine of Conversion as stated in the official writings of Iowa remains to this day. They still teach to different kinds of resistance and conduct in man. Dr. Reu speaks of "Noble souls," namely such souls that are outside the kingdom of God but because of the absence of willful resistance are appreciably nearer to the kingdom of God. And Dr. Lenski repeatedly uses the expression "natural and willful" resistance. They teach that natural resistance is present with all men when the grace of God approaches, but this natural resistance can be overcome by the Holy Ghost. It is not obstacle to conversion. But willful resistance that they define as a mysterious wickedness that goes beyond the natural depravity of man, the Holy Ghost cannot overcome.

Whether a person is then converted or not depends upon the kind of resistance he offers when God comes to that person with his saving grace. If it is only natural resistance, the Holy Spirit accomplishes his work and converts the sinner, but if it is willful resistance, conversion is frustrated by the sinner himself. So we're right back to the same old doctrine that has always been taught by Iowa and Ohio. Even though conversion is presented as entirely the work of God, the different kinds of conduct found in man still are the deciding factor whether man will be converted or not. So the final decision in man's conversion after all is not found with God but rather with man. If he offers only natural resistance, the grace of God converts if he offers willful resistance, God's grace cannot convert. This new approach removes in a certain measure the reproach of synergism but it is still the same old false doctrine of Iowa and Ohio that the A.L.C. is preaching and living today.

Since the purpose of the Common Confession is to settle the differences of doctrine that have been existing all these years between the Synodical Conference and the A.L.C., and since both the A.L.C. and the Missouri Synod have adopted the Common Confession, we must examine and prove this confession on the basis of the Word of God to answer for ourselves the question: Does the Common Confession actually resolve the conflicting teachings between the Synodical Conference and the A.L.C. regarding conversion. The article on conversion in the Common Confession contains two rather short sentences. What these two sentences state is scripturally correct. And furthermore what they say has not only been taught by the Synodical Conference but has also been taught by the Ohio Synod right along. Yet we are certainly indulging in wishful thinking if we say that this article settles all previous controversies between the A.L.C. and the Synodical Conference. Christian love and honesty on our part require that we view this new document in the light of past controversies, since no correction or retraction of the false teachings of conversion have been forthcoming from the A.L.C. And when viewed in this light, the article certainly does not stand up. It settles nothing because it does not go far enough on a given point. Its inadequacy consists not in what it says but in what it omits. The floodgates for the admission of false doctrine stand wide open. As the article of conversion now reads in the Common Confession

it leaves room for the scripturally untenable doctrine about natural and willful resistance and about a prevenient grace which prepares man to accept the grace of God. This article plainly does not present the whole counsel of God on the doctrine of conversion.

It is evident that this document then does not do what it was intended and designed to do. It sidesteps the main issues by not mentioning them at all. Are previous differences to be settled, then confessional honesty demands not only a thetical but also an antithetical document. We need a document that states not only the positive doctrines of Scripture but also rejects all errors.

Our course of action therefore must be clear to us, irrespective of what unenviable reputation we might gain for ourselves by taking the right course. We must reject the paragraph on conversion in the Common Confession as a confession that is to settle past differences between the Synodical Conference and the A.L.C. God does not hold us responsible for the results that such a course of action may produce. He does tell us that only then do we have a right to continue as a true church in the upbuilding of His kingdom among all men if we continue in His Word and abide in His truth.

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