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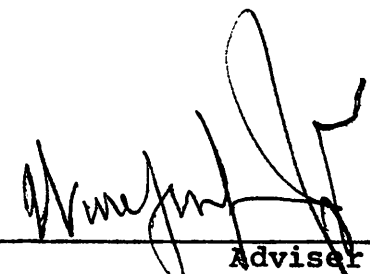
AN EXAMINATION OF THE LUTHERAN
DOCTRINE OF CONVERSION

A Research Paper Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for elective
S-200

by

George A. Volkert

May 1980


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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a surge of interest in Christian witnessing and evangelism, both in America and abroad. Methodologies for sharing the Gospel, together with programs of training, have sprung up and flourished, particularly in the evangelical denominations. The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, too, has given greater attention to missions and evangelism recently, and at the time this is being written, the Synod is preparing for a mass convocation on evangelism later in the year.

The urgency with which the task of evangelism is being approached is certainly commendable, as it is also appropriate to our conviction that only Christ can save. Yet as the church approaches this task in our day, it is important for us to consider carefully the primary goal of our witnessing, namely, the conversion of men. This becomes particularly necessary for us as Lutherans when we realize how varied are the theological orientations regarding this subject represented in the several programs and methodologies for evangelism which are available. If we are to maintain the biblical and confessional understanding in this matter, we must examine closely both the

nature of conversion and the manner in which it is produced in men's lives. Having done this, we should be better equipped to effectively share the Gospel, as well as to evaluate any theological shortcomings in presently available evangelism programs.

Overview of the Topic

The doctrine of conversion is a complex and many-faceted teaching, integrally related to a vast range of the other tenets of the Christian faith. While we shall, in a moment, need to limit our investigation and discussion, it is important at the outset that we offer some brief overview of the topic of conversion so as to put into perspective the presentation that follows.

Conversion is that instantaneous act of God the Holy Spirit whereby new spiritual life is created in a man. This act of God has been necessitated by the fall of Adam and Eve into sin which resulted in spiritual death for them, as well as for all their descendants, who inherit sin and its judgment. Such spiritual death entails loss of free will in spiritual matters and eternal condemnation.¹

In His mercy, however, God determined from eternity to avert the judgment of sin, desiring that men should be saved and not condemned (Ezek. 33:11; 1 Tim. 2:4). God's

¹Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Translated by Theodore Engelder et al., 4 vol. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:555.

eternal plan of salvation involves the divine foreknowledge and predestination in Christ of those who trust in Christ and His redeeming work for salvation and life everlasting. Furthermore, God's plan includes the provision of the means whereby salvation is to be applied to men, namely, the Word and the Sacraments. It is by these means of grace that the Holy Spirit calls men to faith, keeps them in it, and produces the fruits of faith in their lives.²

Thus, conversion is a decisive element in God's plan of salvation. The Word is here applied by the Holy Spirit to the individual. By the Law, the Spirit first prepares the person for conversion by producing the terrores conscientiae (terrors of conscience) and despair. When such contrition has been brought forth, then the Holy Spirit creates faith in the individual by means of the Gospel. Here we see that conversion is synonymous with repentance, which likewise embraces contrition and faith.³

This creation of faith is also synonymous with regeneration, or the begetting by the Holy Spirit of the new spiritual life in man.⁴ Particularly in the sense of regeneration, conversion is related to Baptism, which St. Paul calls "the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). It is Baptism which

²Ibid., 3:473, 474, 477.

³Ibid., 2:459, 502.

⁴Ibid., 2:499.

especially serves as God's instrument for application of the Gospel to infants, yielding faith and spiritual life in them also.

By Baptism, man is brought to share in Christ's death and resurrection, with the result the sinful human nature is put to death and the new man comes forth (Rom. 6:6-8). Yet there ensues in this life a constant struggle between the sinful flesh and the new man. In this struggle, Baptism becomes the key factor in maintaining the new spiritual life. Daily, the Christian harks back to this Sacrament and his faith is renewed through repentance and the forgiveness of sins.⁵ This is conversion as it has a pervasive and continuous influence in the life of the believer (conversio continuata) following the first, or primary, instance when faith was originally kindled in his heart.⁶

The struggle between the old and the new man is not completed in this life, however. The final goal of conversion, that is, restoration of the image of God in man, is not completed until the believer is called out of this life to heaven. During a man's earthly life, the divine image lost at the fall is restored, but not

⁵SC IV, 11-14. (Unless otherwise indicated, confessional references are to: Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and trans., The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

⁶Pieper, Dogmatics, 2:467.

perfectly. The will, which was bound in sin, hostile to God, and resistant to the Gospel, is regenerated and set free to serve God, though it cannot serve Him perfectly on earth.⁷ Only in the life to come can men be perfectly in harmony with the Lord, yet conversion remains God's act to initiate that eternal spiritual life here.

Focus on Luther's Pure Passive

Having summarized the doctrine of conversion and its relation to the various articles of faith, it becomes incumbent upon us in a paper of the scope of this one to focus our attention on one aspect of this vast topic. With the present prominence of "decision theology," popularized by such as Billy Graham and asserted in many evangelism programs, notably Dr. James Kennedy's Evangelism Explosion, one particular aspect of Lutheran teaching stands out as deserving our special attention. That point on which we wish to concentrate is Luther's understanding of man as pure passive (purely passive), or mere passive (merely passive) in conversion.

It was out of his insistence on the great Reformation principle of sola gratia that Luther so stressed the teaching of pure passive. His use of this term was in accord with usage by the scholastics, who held that

". . .there are certain subjects which have no power in themselves to produce a form,

⁷Ap IV, 351, 352; FC SD I, 14; II, 67, 68.

they merely receive a form. These are said to behave in a purely passive manner."⁸

There could be no room for synergism, and Luther was determined by his use of pure passive to bar any suggestion of human cooperation in conversion and salvation. This was God's work alone and was bestowed as a gift of His grace apart from any merit or deed of man. Yet this was not to imply that God converts man by coercion.⁹

The understanding of conversion thus propounded by Luther stands as a paradox between synergism and the determinism of Calvin. This position proved very soon not to be palatable to many theologians, including some leading Lutherans. Notably, it was Melanchthon who reintroduced synergism in Lutheran circles with his Variata edition of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, particularly in the revised fourth article. Also after the adoption of the Formula of Concord, there were those Lutherans, like Latermann, Dreier and Calixt in the seventeenth century, who attacked the pure passive.¹⁰ So too, the Council of Trent criticized the Lutheran position in scathing terms,

⁸Martin Chemnitz, Examen Concilii Tridentini, Prima pars, locus VII, sectio V, par. 8, ed. by Eduard Preuss (Berlin: Gustav Schlawitz, 1861), p. 144, as cited in Robert D. Preus, "The Significance of Luther's Term Pure Passive as Quoted in Article II of the Formula of Concord," Concordia Theological Monthly 29 (August 1958):566.

⁹Preus, "Significance of Luther's Pure Passive," pp. 562, 563, 567.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 564, 565.

insisting on a synergistic understanding of conversion.¹¹ More recently, criticism of the Lutheran teaching of pure passive has arisen in the predestinarian controversy among American Lutherans in the late 1800s, and in the writings of modern Reformed theologians.

The paradoxical position held by Lutheranism continues to prompt such criticism due to the fact it leaves as a mystery the reason why some are converted and others not (the crux theologorum: cur alii prae aliis?). Synergism seeks to solve this mystery in this life, offering as a solution that there is something in man, some dissimilar conduct, that accounts for the conversion or resistance of an individual.¹² This we hope to show is incompatible with Scripture. Only the Lutheran position remains within the confines of the scriptural revelation.

¹¹Ibid., p. 568. The Tridentine condemnation of the Lutheran position was given expression in session VI, canon 4.

¹²Pieper, Dogmatics, 2:481, 482.

I. MAN AS SUBJECTUM CONVERTENDUM

In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, Luther writes:

I believe that by my own reason or strength
I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord,
or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has
called me through the Gospel. . . .¹

With these words, the great Reformer has summarized his whole position regarding conversion, including his tenet of pure passive. Since the fall, man, of himself, is incapable of turning to God or believing in Christ. He is thus a purely passive subjectum convertendum (subject to be converted), or subjectum patiens (subject undergoing [conversion]),² while God alone can act to convert him. In brief, man is never the author of conversion, but only the object of the Holy Spirit's converting work.

Man's Will Altogether Hostile to God

Man cannot bring about his own conversion, even as he cannot bring about any good, because the fall into sin

¹SC II, 6.

²Robert D. Preus, "The Significance of Luther's Term Pure Passive as Quoted in Article II of the Formula of Concord," Concordia Theological Monthly 29 (August 1958): 562.

has robbed the natural man of the image of God (imago Dei). This means that man is, by nature, bereft of ". . .all power to think, to will, or to do, any good thing. . ."³ The fall has corrupted all the faculties of man, including his will, making him altogether hostile to God and His divine will. Man's will, together with all his faculties, is bound in Satan's service and is driven by the devil to pursue only sin,⁴ as the Scriptures also testify:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Gen. 6:5)

They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one. (Ps. 14:3)

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin." (John 8:34)

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot. (Rom. 8:7)

This is what it means, then, to say that man is spiritually dead. Man is incapable of serving God in the least way, and is so thoroughly hostile to the divine will as to constantly refuse to follow it.

Now this position of Luther is, at least in principle, also taken by Calvin. He writes in his Institutes:

³A. L. Graebner, Outlines of Doctrinal Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1910), p. 176.

⁴FC SD II, 5-7.

Grant that there is nothing in human nature but flesh, and then extract something good out of it if you can.

When the will is enchained as a slave of sin, it cannot make a movement towards goodness, far less steadily pursue it.⁵

The teaching of total depravity summed up in these few lines continues to be held by Calvin's followers, and notably by those of the evangelical denominations. One such writer states:

Natural man is totally unable to do anything spiritually good.

Those who have the wrong concept of salvation believe that the will of man is the determining factor, but the will that determines is the same depraved will that must be determined. . . .If man has a "free will" to choose good or evil, then why is it that all men choose the evil of free will?⁶

Billy Graham, in his book on conversion, writes the following comment:

The Scripture teaches that we are dead in trespasses and in sins. A dead man can do nothing; therefore we need God's help even in our repenting.⁷

However, as we can see in this passage, the distinctive character of the Calvinistic teaching of total depravity is

⁵John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Translated by Henry Beveridge, 2 vol. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 1:249, 253.

⁶W. E. Best, Regeneration and Conversion (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Guardian Press, 1975), pp. 3, 31.

⁷Billy Graham, How To Be Born Again (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1977), p. 158.

often diluted with Arminian tendencies among the evangelicals.

Arminianism is the modern representative of Pelagian and semi-Pelagian thought, which Luther and the Confessions opposed. These positions run counter to the scriptural evidence by denying or minimizing any impairment of man's spiritual abilities as may have resulted from the fall. Thus the proponents of these positions held that man might himself turn to God, or at least do so by cooperating with the divine aid of grace.⁸ Again citing Billy Graham, we see how Calvinism and Arminianism have been mixed together:

Man is a contradiction. On one side is hatred, depravity, and sin; on the other side is kindness, compassion, and love. Man is a helpless sinner on one hand, and has capacities which would relate him to God on the other.⁹

This hybrid theology begins in a seemingly innocuous way, yet ends disastrously, with serious implications for the doctrine of conversion.

The statement cited above, while mentioning depravity, hedges on the subject and minimizes man's corruption. In contrast, the Scriptures, as we have seen, teach that man does not merely tend in part to be sinful, but is by nature completely sinful, his will being altogether

⁸FC Ep I, 13-16; SD II, 75-77.

⁹Graham, Born Again, p. 66.

hostile against God. He is opposed even to God's offer of forgiveness in the Gospel, the Gospel being foolishness to corrupted human reason (1 Cor. 1:18-25).¹⁰ Foolishly, man supposes he can keep God's Law and earn his own salvation. However, the Law's demands must eventually prove too stringent. Thus the Law becomes more and more hateful as it condemns even man's best efforts.¹¹

Man as Pure Passive in Conversion

If man is spiritually dead by nature, totally corrupt, hostile to God, and capable only of sin, then to conclude he is pure passive in conversion seems only logical, if not too generous. At best, it would seem that while God is creating new life in a person, the natural self would be raging and screaming in opposition to the Holy Spirit's work. Whatever the response of the old man, though, it is never in the form of cooperation in conversion, as again we may sum up with Luther's words: "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him."¹²

¹⁰F[rancis] Pieper, Conversion and Election: A Plea For a United Lutheranism in America (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1913), p. 31.

¹¹Theodore Engelder, "Contrition," Translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman and Erwin Lueker, Concordia Theological Monthly 28 (May, June, July 1957); 331. Cf. also FC SD II, 9, 10.

¹²SC II, 6.

Yet many insist that man does have a part in his conversion, that he in some way promotes it. Some, in line with Pelagian thought, even suggest that man takes the initiative and seeks God out.¹³ Others are more subtle in their propositions, including many modern Calvinists. Even despite a doctrine of total depravity, man's will is accorded some seemingly insignificant credit, and this because of human pride which cannot bear to admit its helplessness.

Man Contributes Nothing to His Conversion

In reaction against Pelagianism and synergism, the Lutheran confessors were quick to seize upon Luther's term, pure passive, and further to expound its implications.

. . .the free will by its own natural powers can do nothing for man's conversion, righteousness, peace, and salvation, cannot cooperate, and cannot obey, believe, and give assent when the Holy Spirit offers the grace of God and salvation through the Gospel. On the contrary, because of the wicked and obstinate disposition with which he was born, he defiantly resists God and his will unless the Holy Spirit illuminates and rules him. . . .

. . .But before man is illuminated, converted, reborn, renewed, and drawn by the Holy Spirit, he can do nothing in spiritual things of himself and by his own powers. In his own conversion or regeneration he can as little begin, effect, or cooperate in anything as a stone, a block, or a lump of clay could.¹⁴

There is no allowance here for even the most microscopic

¹³FC Ep I, 16.

¹⁴FC SD II, 18, 24.

part of cooperation or free will in man's conversion. Man, as a purely passive subjectum convertendum, contributes absolutely nothing, but is acted upon by the Holy Spirit. This position has been guarded tenaciously in Lutheranism, lest the sola gratia be impinged upon even by the slightest possibility for man to claim some merit in his salvation.¹⁵

Quite obviously in contrast to this position is the Arminian approach to conversion, as, for instance, this is represented by Billy Graham. For him, conversion is a "point of decision" which man strives to reach.¹⁶ Faith in Christ is a voluntary matter, depending on one's personal decision; belief is an act of man's will. God creates new life in a person when that person is "willing to yield to God."¹⁷ It seems hardly necessary to state that this represents Pelagianism, teaching that is unacceptable by Lutheran, as well as scriptural, standards. If we may cite just a few passages from Scripture, the point will be clear.

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. . . . (Eph. 2:1)

. . .for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Phil. 2:13)

¹⁵Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Translated by Theodore Engelder et al., 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 2:482.

¹⁶Graham, Born Again, p. 10.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 68, 150, 162, 167.

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:18)

These verses emphasize again that it is none of man's will, but God's will and action which are operative in conversion.

Now apparently in keeping with such passages, Calvin and his followers also speak of conversion as wholly God's work. In fact, they on occasion use the phrase "purely passive" to describe man as the object of God's converting work.¹⁸ Or to cite another of these theologians:

The cause is not in the response of the will to the presentation of motives by God, nor in any mere coöperation of the will of man with the will of God, but is an almighty act of God in which the will of man, by which its freedom to choose God as its end is restored and rightly exercised (John 1:12, 13).¹⁹

Yet in the last phrases here quoted, there appears in subtle form something not compatible with the idea of pure passive as understood by Luther.

The following from Calvin may help us to recognize the apparent difficulty:

When the will is enchained as a slave of sin, it cannot make a movement towards goodness. . . . Every such movement is the first step in that conversion to God, which in Scripture is entirely ascribed to divine grace.²⁰

¹⁸L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, Second revised and enlarged edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), p. 465.

¹⁹Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1907), p. 793.

²⁰Calvin, Institutes, 1:453.

The problem, which is more clearly delineated by modern Calvinists, lies in the understanding of conversion as a process, rather than as an instantaneous act. This is further clarified when we also realize that the Calvinist vocabulary is quite different from the Lutheran in its definitions. Thus, the followers of Calvin rather dissect conversion--which we consider a single act synonymous with regeneration--and speak of regeneration as the active side of conversion and not precisely synonymous with it.²¹

Strong puts it as follows:

Regeneration, or the new birth, is the divine side of that change of the heart which, viewed from the human side we call conversion. It is God's turning the soul to himself,--conversion being the soul's turning itself to God, of which God's turning it is both the accompaniment and cause.²²

The subtle dichotomy established here might be excused if it were simply a matter of definitions. However, the definitions applied are unacceptable since they imply, despite all disclaimers, that man's salvation depends on his willingly exercising the grace he has been given. Regeneration merely makes conversion possible. The implanting of new life--by an immediate act of God--enables man to hear the Gospel effectually and decide about Christ for himself. The result is, in fact, that man believes by his own power.²³

²¹Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 483.

²²Strong, Systematic Theology, p. 809

²³Ibid., pp. 809, 829; Best, Regeneration and Conversion, pp. 30-33.

This concession to free will leads, as Pieper points out, to a monstrous supposition, ". . .that 'grace' puts man in a position to decide against grace."²⁴ Nor will this problem fade away with the application of a deterministic doctrine of predestination in which only the elect are regenerated, for man is no longer passive in this theory of conversion.

Perhaps, though, the proponents of this dichotomy between regeneration and conversion will object that it is the regenerate will which man employs when he turns to Christ. Yet this is to imply that conversion is a part of sanctification, of mortification of the old man, in contrast to our position that it is a divine act of justification.²⁵ Then take note of Berkhof's contention that conversion is absolutely necessary--at least in adults--for salvation,²⁶ and the difficulty becomes clear. A work, admittedly designated man's own work, becomes necessary if a man is to be saved. The sola gratia as expressed in Eph. 2:8, 9, is vitiated; this is hardly tenable, or acceptable in the church.

Man Merely "Undergoes" Conversion

So then, how may we summarize man's part in conversion? In answer, we return to the designations

²⁴Pieper, Dogmatics, 2:482.

²⁵Engelder, "Contrition," p. 423.

²⁶Berkhof, Systematic Theology, pp. 490, 491.

subjectum convertendum and subjectum patiens. Man is, as these terms suggest, in no way the author of conversion, but the passive object of the Holy Spirit's converting work. He does not cooperate in his conversion, but simply undergoes, or experiences, it. As the Formula of Concord states:

Man is, as it were, the subject which suffers. That is, man does or works nothing; he only suffers--though not as a stone does when a statue is carved out of it, or wax when a seal is impressed into it, for these do not know anything about what is going on or perceive or will anything in connection with it. . . .²⁷

Or to state it another way, man has a passive capacity for conversion.²⁸

This passive capacity does not, however, suggest any contribution to conversion by man. Rather, it implies that man, as created by God, has those senses and faculties through which the regenerative word of the Gospel may be applied to him, such as hearing and a rational mind. Thus, it is only by God's gracious activity of proclaiming the

²⁷FC SD II, 89. The English "suffer" translates the German leiden, here and in paragraphs 73 and 90 of this article of the Formula. In one instance in paragraph 90, it translates lassen. The Latin rendering here and in paragraph 90 is patior, while paragraph 73 instances the phrase pure passive habeat. Interpretation of the concept intended must rely on the context, but the sense of meaning which the German and Latin seem to have in common is simply "undergo; experience; or, be subject to [the action of another]." F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau, ed., Triglot Concordia (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), pp. 908, 909, 914, 915. See also, Pieper, Dogmatics, 2:456, 457.

²⁸Preus, "Significance of Luther's Pure Passive," p. 562.

Gospel through Word and Sacrament that man is converted.²⁹ If there is any activity of the human will when God makes the Gospel known, then this can consist only of antagonism prior to man's being converted; whereas, any cooperation with the Holy Spirit must be solely on the part of the new man, and must follow conversion, as a fruit of faith.

Yet, on the other hand, that man is purely passive in this way is not to imply that man is coerced to believe. Man may, of course, stubbornly resist God's grace, if he wills. However, if he believes, this is due to the Holy Spirit's work in conversion alone. For the Spirit alone creates faith in man through the Gospel; and together with this, He also gives man a new will which is turned toward God.³⁰ From the instant these are created, they are actively assenting to the Gospel and to the Lord's will.³¹ On this basis, then, we can state that man is pure passive in conversion, yet not coerced.

²⁹E. W. A. Koehler, "Faith," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (February 1941):100,101.

³⁰Ibid., p. 101.

³¹Pieper, Dogmatics, 2:427, 472, 473.

II. GOD AS SOLE AUTHOR OF CONVERSION

Natural man is spiritually dead and has no power to effect conversion or salvation in himself. When he is converted, he is merely a passive subjectum convertendum, undergoing the act of another. So then, who is that other, the active party in conversion? With the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, we state that God alone is the author of conversion. It is God who is mentioned in the nominative case when the Scriptures speak of our conversion and regeneration, for instance, in Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 1:12, 13; 2:13; and James 1:18. Thus, the Scriptures name God as the sole author of conversion, as also the Confessions affirm.¹

Now in the previous section, we have noted that Reformed theologians, even those with Arminian tendencies, concur that God alone creates the new life in man.² Difficulties arise, however, in the definition of what precisely is meant when we speak of God creating the new life. These problems have also been introduced in the foregoing pages, as we have examined the dichotomy set up

¹See SC II, 6; LC II, 38-42; FC SD II, 25.

²See above, pp. 14, 15.

by Calvinist theologians, distinguishing regeneration from conversion.

With this in mind, then, our concern will be, not so much the fact of divine monergism in regeneration, but rather, the way in which God creates the new life in man. We will examine how man is prepared for conversion, as well as the means by which God ultimately creates the new life. In addition, we will especially want to see what is entailed in God's regenerative act, that is, what the range of the results of His converting work is.

Holy Spirit Prepares Man For Conversion Through Law

If it is generally held that God alone produces the new life in man, then it is also common to particularly associate regeneration and sanctification with the Holy Spirit, as did Jesus (John 3:5, 6), St. Paul (1 Cor. 2:12-14), 2 Tim. 1:14), and Luther (explanation of the Third Article). Thus, we say that the Holy Spirit converts men and creates faith in their hearts. Yet before this can occur, man must be prepared for conversion. This, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit, albeit His alien work (opus alienum). For natural man can as little prepare himself for conversion as he can produce new life in himself. Again, man is merely the subjectum convertendum, while the Spirit is active and is alone responsible for any acts preparatory

to conversion.³

Law Drives Man to Despair

In preparing man for conversion, the Holy Spirit has an agenda of but one item. This item is the goal of His opus alienum, namely, to produce in man the terrores conscientiae, or contrition. To accomplish this, He applies the divine Law to man, with its condemnation of sin.⁴

Such application of the Law is necessitated by the fallen nature of man, and specifically, by his corrupt self-image. Man's perception of himself is based on a distorted view of the Law, as this is written in his heart and issues in the judgments of conscience. This distorted opinio legis is natural man's conviction that he is able to abide by God's will and earn salvation for himself, turning himself to the pursuit of good deeds. Indeed, man is willing to do great and astounding things for God if he can thereby earn his own way into heaven.⁵

This, however, is a distorted view on man's part. As long as a person supposes he can earn salvation and

³Francis Pieper, Conversion and Election: A Plea For a United Lutheranism in America (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1913), pp. 109, 117.

⁴Theodore Engelder, "Contrition," Translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman and Erwin Lueker, Concordia Theological Monthly 28 (May, June, July 1957):328. See also, Ap XII, 51.

⁵Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Translated by Theodore Engelder et al., 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 2:457, 458.

avert God's wrath with his own good works, he cannot be converted. This opinio legis, which is really a religion of works-righteousness, must be overthrown, for it is inimical to the Gospel of salvation by grace for Christ's sake through faith. The person who clings to this opinio legis can never be brought to faith in Christ, because he does not recognize any need for forgiveness.⁶

"Faith and self-righteousness cannot dwell together."⁷ Before faith can be implanted in the heart, man must be driven to despair of human works. This the Law does by condemning all that a person might do apart from Christ (Is. 64:6), leaving him absolutely hopeless, convinced the only goal he is capable of reaching on his own power is hell.⁸

Such despair as this, caused by the Law with its judgments, is that true contrition which must precede conversion proper, or the kindling of faith.⁹ Yet while contrition precedes conversion, it is not a contribution to conversion. "Contrition in no way. . . produces forgiveness."¹⁰ Rather, it is simply a state of terror

⁶Engelder, "Contrition," pp. 328, 329.

⁷Ibid., p. 329.

⁸C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, Translated by W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), pp. 369, 370.

⁹Pieper, Dogmatics, 2:460, 461.

¹⁰Engelder, "Contrition," p. 330.

and bewilderment produced by God's Law in a man who is still spiritually dead.¹¹

Regeneration Not a Prerequisite of Contrition

Not surprisingly, the concept of contrition as God's preparation of the natural man for conversion meets with some opposition from Calvinist theologians. This is, of course, due to the dichotomy they perceive between regeneration and conversion. As previously noted, regeneration is, in their understanding, an immediate act of God producing new life; conversion follows regeneration and is man's act.¹²

In keeping with these definitions, then, the one point of opposition to the Lutheran concept is the claim that God creates the new life without preparation. "Sinners need nothing to predispose. . . them for the implanting of new life."¹³ Certainly, this might well be expected in a system of unconditional election issuing in irresistible grace.

The other point at issue--and this will prove a factor in our later discussion--is the capability of men to receive God's Word, or to put it otherwise, the effective power of the Word with men. The Calvinists contend that only after the new life has been implanted can the Word have any effect

¹¹Pieper, Conversion and Election, p. 117.

¹²See above, p. 16.

¹³W. E. Best, Regeneration and Conversion (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Guardian Press, 1975), p. 82.

on a person. So we read with regard to regeneration, as contrasted with conversion:

In this act of God the ear is implanted that enables man to hear the call of God to the salvation of his soul. . . Having received the spiritual ear, the call of God in the gospel is now heard by the sinner, and is brought home effectively to the heart.¹⁴

Or, in a more specific statement:

Without the illumination of the Spirit, in regeneration, there can be no repentance and faith. Thus, the Spirit draws the soul to Christ in regeneration. He then shines in that heart, by conviction of sin that wounds, and then the convicted man embraces Jesus Christ for deliverance.¹⁵

The implication is that even the Law does not affect the unregenerate, which, of course, rules out contrition as prior to the implanting of the new life. Surely this concept goes a long way to bolster deterministic predestination by giving the non-elect altogether no opportunity. Yet taken to its logical conclusion, does it not even call into question Calvin's idea that sin among men is, at least outwardly, curbed by the Law?¹⁶

More to the point, then, to say the Law cannot affect those who are unregenerate, quite frankly, runs counter to

¹⁴L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, Second revised and enlarged edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), p. 471.

¹⁵Best, Regeneration and Conversion, pp. 62, 63.

¹⁶John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Translated by Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 1:251, 252.

the scriptural witness. For we are told how Judas, filled with remorse and despairing of hope, went out and hanged himself after betraying Jesus (Matt. 27:3-5). Surely, this is the ordinary and final effect of the Law upon a person as we have described it, yet Judas was apparently unregenerate. Or we read of King Herod, how he was frightened by John the Baptizer's condemnation of his incestuous marriage (Mark 6:18-20). Or to mention one further instance, we are told that Paul's proclamation of the Law made the heathen Felix tremble, and call for a cessation of this rehearsal of doom (Acts 24:25). Admittedly, the Law produced no sanctified deeds in these people's lives; but then, we would contend that it cannot. The Law only accuses, and terrifies consciences with condemnation,¹⁷ and this it can also accomplish in the unregenerate, as the cited passages show. In brief, contrition does not require preceding regeneration; rather, contrition must precede regeneration.

Holy Spirit Converts Man Through Gospel

The direst problem presented in the Calvinist position just considered is the depreciation of the Word of God and of its power. If the Law is here implied to have no effect on the spiritually dead, then it should come as little surprise that one of the same authors writes: "It is vain to say that men are regenerated by the power of the gospel."¹⁸

¹⁷Ap IV, 257

¹⁸Best, Regeneration and Conversion, p. 21.

In other words, the Gospel can affect a person only after God has acted immediately to create the new life in him.

The Scriptures' own testimony concerning themselves stands in sharp contrast to these opinions, however.

Consider the following verses:

You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;. . . That word is the good news which was preached to you. (1 Pet. 1:23, 25)

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:18)

These passages make it clear that the Holy Spirit implants the new life, not to mention all the accompanying attributes of it, mediately through the Word, and specifically, through the Gospel. Our concern, then, is to see what shape this new life, created through the Word, takes. What is the range of the effects of God's regenerative acts?

Gospel Produces Faith and Repentance

Before the Gospel can effectively be applied to men, their natural opinio legis, which is inimical to the Gospel of salvation by grace, must be overthrown. As we have stated previously, this preparation for conversion God accomplishes through the Law, producing despair, or contrition.¹⁹ Now when a person has been brought to this state of hopelessness by the Law, God then offers salvation to him through the Gospel, whether preached or read.

¹⁹See above, pp. 22, 23.

By offering salvation through the Gospel, God produces, in the first place, faith in the heart of a person. As St. Paul writes, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom. 10:17), in other words, by the Gospel of Christ. The faith which God thus produces grasps the promised salvation offered in the Gospel,²⁰ and so St. Paul says: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. . ." (Eph. 2:8). This faith saves; it is not merely an abstract quality. It saves because, by its very nature, and even at the instant it is created, it is assenting to and trusting in God's gracious provision of salvation in Christ.²¹ Further, because it apprehends the grace of God, faith is also said to justify, that is, to obtain righteousness before God,²² as St. Paul writes: "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (Rom. 1:17).

Now the fact God creates faith by means of the Gospel leads us also to say that God produces true repentance thereby. For repentance consists of contrition and faith, so our Confessions suggest,²³ and this definition is in keeping with the usage of Scripture. For instance, Jesus says, ". . . unless you repent you will all likewise

²⁰Ap IV, 386.

²¹Pieper, Dogmatics, 2:427.

²²FC SD III, 41.

²³AC XII, 3-5.

perish" (Luke 13:5); and Paul writes, "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation. . . ." (2 Cor. 7:10). The implication here is that if faith alone saves, then faith must also be a part of repentance. In fact, the creation of faith is the turning point in repentance; for it is in this instant that the despair of contrition gives way to hope in the promise of forgiveness.

Then in consideration of our definition, we also would hold that repentance is synonymous with conversion.²⁴ For repentance, as we have defined it, involves an alteration of a person, whereby a condemned sinner is made a believer in Christ and so considered righteous. This is also the commonly accepted definition of conversion, as well as the intended meaning in such passages as Matt. 13:15 and James 5:19, 20. So we may in addition conclude that conversion is produced by God through the Gospel. Yet let us clarify that conversion and repentance being synonymous, are created simultaneously. Further, as the creation of faith marks the pivotal point in repentance, so it also does in conversion, and these are simultaneous as well.

Gospel Produces New Life
Which Possesses New Will

In introducing our discussion of the work of the

²⁴pieper, Dogmatics, 2:502.

Holy Spirit mediated through the Gospel, we stated that the Spirit creates new life in men through the Gospel, as evidenced in 1 Pet. 1:23, 25, and James 1:18. It remains now to briefly describe this new life. We will also want to relate it to faith and conversion, or repentance.

When God regenerates man, He endows him ". . .with spiritual power to know and understand spiritual truths, to will and to do what is spiritually good. . ."²⁵ These are the very powers which man lost in the fall. Therefore, before man is regenerated, he neither knows nor desires spiritual things. In the words of Rom. 8:7: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot."

To return to the regenerate man, then, God has changed the old hostile will in him so that his will is now attuned to God's will. This means that salvation offered as a gift of grace, so abhorrent to the old man, is desired by the new man.²⁶ So also as to conduct, the new man delights to do God's will. In Phil. 2:13, we read: ". . .for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Here it would seem, we begin to see the relation between the new life and faith. For faith also assents to and trusts in God's gracious will revealed in the Gospel,

²⁵A. L. Graebner, Outlines of Doctrinal Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1910), p. 176.

²⁶Pieper, Dogmatics, 2:472.

beginning from the very instant God creates it. Is it not quite apparent that the regenerate will and faith are of one and the same attitude? Nor should this surprise us, for St. John writes: "Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God. . ." (1 John 5:1; KJV, "is born of God"). In this verse, we have the synthesis of faith and the new man; the one who believes on Christ by faith is a regenerate man. The two are not to be dichotomized. Rather, we may make the same bold statement the confessors made: "Since this faith is a new life, it necessarily produces new impulses and new works."²⁷ Faith and the new life, both created by the Spirit through the Gospel, are one, and come into existence simultaneously. If then, as we stated before, the creation of faith is the pivotal point in conversion, or repentance, then regeneration, too, stands at that crossroads in God's saving activity. Thus, in conversion, men are changed, not only from hostility to faith, but likewise from death to life.

²⁷Ap IV, 250.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings and Our Position

While others have sought the reason why some are saved and others are not, Luther and the confessors wisely spoke only as much as Scripture would support. They found that God was credited as the sole author of man's faith and salvation, though man was alone responsible if he were eternally lost. So in this light, Luther, together with his followers, chose to describe man as pure passive in the matter of his conversion, and as a subjectum convertendum. In other words, man contributed absolutely nothing to his conversion, but only underwent God's gracious action.

Now in a certain sense, we have found agreement with this position among modern Calvinist theologians, yet not altogether. For these men wish to dichotomize regeneration and conversion. Regeneration, they state, is God's act alone, performed without means, man being passive and needing no preparation for this. Conversion, in contrast, is man's act, prompted by the Gospel, in which man turns to Christ. Perhaps this is compatible with a system of unconditional election and irresistible grace,

but it presents grave problems in light of Scripture. For to sunder regeneration and conversion in this way is, however subtly, to open the door to synergism. Man's will is given a part in conversion; and even if it is the regenerate will that the theologian has in mind, yet it is a good work, or choice, of man which determines his salvation. This will not wash with the sola gratia. So we take exception to this Calvinist dichotomy, lest we fall into synergism. Anyway, this peculiar theory is not taught in the Scriptures, in the first place.

What the Scriptures do teach concerning conversion, if we may summarize, is simply that God alone is the author of conversion, carrying it out by means of His Word. First, applying the Law, God produces contrition, or sorrow and despair, in man to destroy any hope he might have of saving himself. Then, when man is despairing, God offers salvation through the Gospel, and by the same Gospel creates faith in the person. At the very instant when this faith is created, it is already assenting to and trusting in the salvation won by Christ. This conversion may also be denominated repentance, for repentance consists also of contrition followed by faith. Further, since the one who believes is also born of God (1 John 5:1), or regenerate, conversion is also synonymous with regeneration, and the new life is also the result of this recreative act of God.

Questions Needing Further Examination

In this paper, we have examined the Lutheran doctrine of conversion from the perspective of Luther's concept of man as pure passive in conversion. Of course, other approaches might have been taken. At this point, we would like to indicate a few aspects of this doctrine which have not been given any great attention here, but which deserve examination.

First, in a sort of contrast to our approach, an examination of the relation of free will to conversion might be undertaken, further clarifying man's situation in this regard prior to and after conversion. Another area for consideration might be the nature of faith as it is created in conversion, with attention to baptismal regeneration and the nature of faith in infants. Then as a concluding possibility, there is a need for some careful examination of the ramifications of the neo-Pentecostal doctrine of the "second baptism" upon the doctrine of conversion. With this, we conclude, hoping this paper has been helpful in clarifying the Lutheran doctrine of conversion, as well as prompting interest in the topic, perhaps also in the additional areas mentioned here.

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