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Contrition

By THEODORE ENGELDER

Translated by HERBERT J. A. BOUMAN

ED. NOTE: This essay, originally written in German under the title "Zur Lehre von der Busze," appeared serially in this journal beginning with the March 1934 issue. The author was the sainted Dr. Theodore Engelder, at that time Professor of Systematic Theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo. It is made accessible to English readers not only as a tribute to this revered teacher but also because of its intrinsic value. The problem under discussion may in some instances have new ramifications and other forms of presentation, but the basic concerns are as relevant today as when expressed by Dr. Engelder more than two decades ago. The article will appear in three installments, translated by two members of the present department of systematic theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., Herbert J. A. Bouman and Erwin L. Lueker. Abbreviations of the original are indicated by [. .].

Confusion regarding the concept contrition can only confuse consciences. "Before the writings of Luther appeared, the doctrine of repentance was very much confused . . . the people were able neither to comprehend the sum of the matter nor to see what things especially were required in repentance, where peace of conscience was to be sought for" (Ap XII 5). If the wrong place in the order of salvation is assigned to contrition, if it is not allowed to function in its proper sphere, if it is drawn into the doctrine of justification, or if it is made the chief factor in sanctification, the poor sinner cannot come to assurance concerning the forgiveness of sins, and in the realm of sanctification, nothing but works of the Law can result. This matter touches the heart of the Christian religion. It will, therefore, be profitable once again to subject the manifold aberrations in the doctrine of contrition to review.*

* In the opening statements the author calls attention to the confusion that exists generally regarding the doctrine of contrition and quotes the following sentence from C. F. W. Walther (*Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 244): "Die rechte Lehre von der Reue hat keine Sekte, nur unsere lutherische Kirche hat sie." — Tr.

The confusion which Dr. Luther had removed is again powerfully asserting itself. "How great the uncleanness concerning conversion and regeneration has become under the influence of Pietism and Methodism!" (W. Luetgert, *Reich Gottes und Weltgeschichte*, p. 44). Confusion in the concept contrition is largely responsible for this state of affairs. Nor may we Lutherans feel secure. Our way of thinking may easily be influenced by the Reformed confusion regarding repentance and the Pietistic-Methodistic view of contrition that confronts us in our theological reading. Worst of all, our old Adam also is infected by the Roman-rationalistic-Jewish approach to contrition.

The unconverted as well as the converted sinner is misinformed and ill-advised in many ways concerning contrition. First we shall consider the question whether contrition effects the sinner's salvation.

I

The question whether forgiveness of sins depends (entirely or partly) on the serious contrition of the sinner is answered affirmatively in many areas within Christendom. Rome affirms it emphatically. The pope teaches that man atones for his sins by his contrition, his sorrow over, and hatred of, sin, and thereby effects the forgiveness of his sins. "Of such repentance they fix three parts, contrition, confession, and satisfaction, with this consolation and promise added: If man truly repent, confess, render satisfaction, he thereby would have merited forgiveness, and paid for his sins before God" (SA-III III 12). To this presentation of their doctrine Romanists can have no objection. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* says: "If the detestation of sin arises from the love of God, who has been grievously offended, then contrition is deemed perfect. If it arises from any other motive, such as loss of heaven, fear of hell, or the heinousness of guilt, it is termed imperfect contrition, or attrition. It is the clear teaching of the Church that perfect contrition justifies the sinner even without the Sacrament of Penance" (s. v. "Attrition"). The *Catholic Encyclopedia* knows its *Catechismus Romanus*, where we read: "The effect of the above mentioned true contrition is such that by virtue of it we at once receive from the Lord the forgiveness of all sins" (II, 5, 30th question). The *Catechismus Romanus*, in turn, is familiar with *Trent*: "The Synod

teaches that . . . it sometimes happens that this contrition is perfect through love and reconciles with God, before this sacrament [penance] is actually received" (Sess. XIV, cap. IV). Of course, the sinner cannot be entirely sure whether his contrition is perfect; it would, therefore, be dangerous to depend on it. A simpler and more reliable way is the way of sacramental Penance. This contrition resulting from fear impels him to renounce sin and make a voluntary confession; the perfect confession is followed by absolution; this imparts grace, where attrition [*Halbreue*] becomes full, voluntary, frank [*freudige*] contrition; the penitent renders the prescribed satisfaction—and his sins are removed (cf. G. Plitt, *Einleitung in die Augsbургische Konfession*, p. 338). Correct, says Trent. "If anyone denies that total and complete forgiveness demands of the penitent three acts, which constitute, as it were, the material elements of the Sacrament of Penance, to wit, contrition and confession and satisfaction . . . let him be anathema!" (Sess. XIV, can. IV). [. . .] There can be no doubt that the Roman Church teaches that the sinner obtains salvation by means of contrition.

Rationalism agrees wholeheartedly with this view. According to rationalism, conversion (repentance), whereby man obtains salvation, consists in the moral improvement of life, and this improvement begins and manifests itself in contrition. The improvement of man which begins with the knowledge and detestation of sins constitutes the way of salvation. The old rationalist K. G. Bretschneider teaches: "The proclamation which Jesus brought before the people was the admonition to an ethical change of mind ('repent') . . . The so-called Sermon on the Mount, which contains the essence of the Lord's instruction to His disciples, may be summarized as follows: 1. Moral purity and goodness is the first condition for entrance into the kingdom of God. . . . Only a pure attitude and obedience toward God's law makes man a worthy partaker of eternal life" (*Die religiöse Glaubenslehre*, p. 281). The Unitarian Eliot says: "God is ready to justify us, graciously to accept us, when we come to Him with believing, confident hearts, trying to do His will as followers of Christ. . . . The chief, and perhaps the only, condition on which we receive forgiveness of prior sins is an act that by its nature excludes merit. It is an act

of self-denial, the prostration of a convicted sinner before God, the act of sincere confession and repentance, in a word, the act of self-surrender to God which the Bible calls faith." (*Discourses*, p. 108)

It is quite natural that all who deny the vicarious atonement of Christ should teach such doctrine. "The Socinians, who deny the atonement for sin by the death of Christ, maintain that repentance is the only atonement required" (R. Shaw, *Exposition of the Westminster Confession*, p. 183). The liberal *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (J. Hastings) demonstrates how and why contrition achieves salvation: "The sorrow of repentance reacts on the soul, strengthening it to meet the new task of moral reformation. . . . How can a man be freed from the burden of his past sins since this burden is itself the creation of his own free spiritual activity? The answer is that the law of continuity is not the only law that obtains in the spiritual realm. There is also a law of recovery or redemption. If the law of moral sequence alone held good, the very purpose of its existence would be frustrated, for it would paralyze all efforts to achieve a life of virtue and righteousness. Moreover, the very fact that man is capable of self-condemnation is proof that evil-doing is not an adequate expression of his personality. How could he condemn himself if there was not in him the consciousness of an ideal to which he owes allegiance? In condemning himself, the penitent has already risen above the self that he condemns. In repentance, what does the penitent man really do? By an inward act he dissociates himself from his sin; he takes the side of God and of all good men in judging it unworthy of his nature and at war with the real order of life" (s. v. "Repentance"). [...]

Jewish theology assigns to contrition the same role that it has in rationalism and Roman Catholicism. It will be profitable for us to take note of this fact. Those who base salvation on contrition ought to familiarize themselves with the origin and development of this fundamental error. It is a product of Jewish thinking. How does the Jew expect to be saved? "It is within the power of every man to redeem himself from sin by resolutely breaking away from it and turning to God, whose loving-kindness is ever extended to the returning sinner. . . . The prophets demanded a regeneration of the heart, i. e., a determined turning from sin and returning

to God by striving after righteousness. . . . 'Repentance and works of charity are man's intercessors before God's throne.' (*Shab.* 38 a.) . . . Where Paulinism speaks of a 'saving grace' of God through Christ, Judaism emphasizes the redeeming power of *teshuba* ('return'), which is nothing else than man's self-redemption from the thraldom of sin. . . . Repentance is not an outward act, as Weber (*Jüdische Theologie*, p. 261) endeavors to represent it, but an inner cleansing of the heart (*Pesik*, 161 b). It must be perfectly sincere, true contrition, coupled with shame and self-reproach, and confession (*Ber.*, 12 b; *Hag.*, 5 a, etc.). It is well analyzed by Philo (in *De execrationibus*, § 8) as a feeling of shame and self-reproach, which leads to a frank and sincere confession and a change of heart and of conduct. . . . In the Catholic Church contrition, confession, and satisfaction become parts of the sacramental act of *poenitentia*, whereas the Protestant churches follow the Pauline teaching pure and simple." This description of Jewish contrition is taken from the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (s. v. "Repentance"). It emphatically renounces the teaching of St. Paul and of Protestantism on this point.

There are, however, many Protestants who are willing to accept this Jewish doctrine of contrition. The Roman-rationalistic-Jewish doctrine of a saving contrition did not remain restricted to the area of its origin but has infiltrated large segments of the Protestant churches. It is true, they do not use the term *satisfactio operis*. "But we must direct attention to one feature of the error which is so much in vogue even among Protestants as to constitute a menace to the Christian life. It is the widespread notion that contrition itself is an atonement for sin. The thought is that the regret for a transgression is an adequate satisfaction to righteousness for the wrong done — that sorrow felt fully pays for the sin and balances the account" (M. Loy, *The Augsburg Confession*, p. 746). Dr. Walther found it necessary to warn Lutheran preachers particularly against this crass error. "It happens all too often that preachers, though wishing to be genuinely Lutheran, mingle Law and Gospel in this way that they picture contrition as a cause of the forgiveness of sins." (p. 240)

The following examples are to demonstrate how, in consequence of "the Pietistic transformation [*Abwandlung*] of the Gospel of

the Reformation which reaches its consummation in Methodism" (Luetgert, p. 43), of the legalistic view of conversion that was native in Reformed theology from the beginning, and of the Jewish-rationalistic-Roman *opinio legis*, clinging to all of us, the idea has gained currency that contrition propitiates God, that sorrow over sin and the improvement of life, allegedly connected with it, results in the forgiveness of sins. The examples to be cited are also to demonstrate the delusion of one who is inclined to accept a treatise on contrition simply because it was not authored by a Roman theologian. Literature published by the Federal Council of Churches teaches sinners to pray thus: "Almighty God . . . here and now may every selfish passion and desire be quiet that by the sorrows of repentance our souls may be purified." This instruction is added: "If we desire the good with all our hearts and put forth our will to turn absolutely from all selfishness and sin and hold fast to the faith, we shall have the assurance of forgiven sin. An honest confession opens the door to God's forgiving grace. . . . The soul that makes confession to Christ is washed through and through, and the seeds of iniquity are driven out. Repentance brings forth deeds that tend to destroy, or atone for, the evil that one has done. Revulsion at one's sin frequently leads to unusual endeavor for good. Turning from evil and seeking to do right, one loses the sense of separation from God that sin brings. One feels forgiven" (*Fellowship of Prayer*, 1925; 1928; 1930). Tracts published by the Apostolic Faith Mission put it this way: "There is only one way back to God, and this through repentance and godly sorrow for sin. . . . God will save you if you give Him a chance. He will blot out the clouds of sin, dispel the darkness, and set you free. Do you feel real repentance down in your heart? . . . The moment you are honest enough to admit your condition before God, repent of your sins, get down before Him and seek forgiveness, begin at the bottom and be willing to make the past right, God will forgive you. Like David, who sinned against God, go down before Him, repent of your sins, and God will restore you. Salvation comes only through repentance and forsaking sin." Many a person reading and hearing statements such as these will discern the truth in them and in his anxiety over sin ask God for forgiveness for Christ's sake. However, the majority will be confused by the false statements, mingled

as they are with such as may be true in themselves, and will conclude that anxiety over sin and the renunciation of sin that is demanded are the conditions of forgiveness. Matthew Henry says in his commentary on Matt. 3:1 ff.: "Repent, for your sins shall be pardoned upon your repentance. Return to God in a way of duty, and He will, through Christ, return to you in a way of mercy." [...] J. Stalker states: "Confession separates the man from the sin, being a kind of violent ejection of the latter. But it has an influence, too, on Him against whom we have sinned. It has a kind of atoning power" (*The Ethic of Jesus*, p. 166). [...]

What was the practice of Pietistic preachers in the past and what do they still say? "Contrition is necessary, as the Scriptures point out on every page. Your own reason tells you that God cannot forgive you anything if you are indifferent concerning your sin. You must have contrition" (Walther, p. 241), as though forgiveness depended on contrition. "The Pietists first drove poor souls into a dreadful anxiety by telling them, 'Not until you have experienced proper contrition may you receive comfort.' But when someone said: 'I have prayed enough, wrestled on my knees enough, cried and groaned and wailed enough before God, yet my heart remains like a stone,' then they said, 'Wouldn't you like to have contrition?' And when this question was answered affirmatively, they said: 'Well, then, be of good comfort. Because you desire contrition so eagerly, God will be gracious to you and forgive you your sins.' But this is an accursed doctrine! This means substituting wretched, miserable, contemptible contrition for the Lord Jesus" (ibid., p. 106). — How are we to understand the following words of H. A. W. Haas? "There are moral conditions of forgiveness. If it is rightly sought and properly used, it must be preceded by genuine repentance. A change of mind and heart must take place which condemns, and is sorry for, the wrong that has been done and the sin that has been committed. Where this change of mind has occurred, forgiveness becomes the assurance which the troubled conscience needs." (*What Ought I to Believe?* p. 75)

We find this opinion expressed among Protestants and even Lutherans in manifold variations that the sinner becomes a partaker of salvation by means of his contrition and moral betterment. This opinion is very hard to eradicate. It invaded the Christian

Church at an early age, this "legalistically false opinion, that contrition and its manifestations in fasting and scourging is meritorious and a help toward removing sin, that the sinner by voluntarily assumed suffering could and should atone for his sins. Thus, since the third century, the church devised a definitely regulated procedure with respect to those who after baptism fell into gross sin and were excommunicated from the congregation, but were ready to do penance for their guilt and to desire readmittance. This constitutes the various degrees of the penitential discipline in the ancient church" (Meusel, *Kirchliches Handlexikon*, s. v. "Busze"). The Reformation cleared away this error, but it always returns. It is, therefore, necessary to remind ourselves again and again of what Scripture teaches concerning contrition and its necessity.

What position does Scripture assign to contrition in the order of salvation? We must emphasize two truths, and at the same time distinguish them very carefully. Contrition is absolutely necessary for the sinner's salvation. Contrition in no wise produces salvation. *

Contrition, that is, knowledge of sin, of the wrath of God, and of His well-deserved condemnation, is necessary because the sinner cannot be converted without this knowledge. In every instance the terrors of conscience because of God's wrath and the threatened condemnation have preceded a sinner's coming to faith. The jailor trembled (Acts 16:29), the 3,000 were cut to the heart (Acts 2:37), the publican smote his breast (Luke 18:13), the Prodigal Son confessed, "Father I have sinned" (Luke 15:18), and God says, "Return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments" (Joel 2:12 f.). This is the way of conversion: "Through this means, namely, the preaching and hearing of His Word, God works, and breaks our hearts, and draws man, so that through the preaching of the Law he comes to know his sins and God's wrath, and experiences in his heart true terrors, contrition, and sorrow, and through the preaching and consideration of the holy Gospel concerning the gracious forgiveness of sins in Christ a spark of faith is kindled in him" (FC SD II 54). Always, in every case, under all

* The confusion to be avoided is expressed in the original by the clause: "damit nicht aus der Heilsordnung eine Unheilsordnung gemacht wird." — Tr.

circumstances, the call to repentance, to a genuine knowledge of sin, must precede the preaching of the Gospel. So our Savior preached, "Repent and believe the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). He has given His church the command that "repentance and remission of sins be preached in His name" (Luke 24:47). At times the Holy Scriptures use the term repentance to designate "the entire conversion of man"; at times, to designate only contrition, where a distinction is made between repentance and faith. (FC SD V 7 f)

There can be no conversion without contrition. Why not? Because a person who does not sense anxiety created by his sins can have no desire for the saving grace of God. A secure and self-righteous sinner despises the Gospel. Our Savior puts it this way: "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31 f.). Luther: "As long as the delusion of his own righteousness remains in a man, so long there remains also an immeasurable pride, presumption, hatred against God, contempt of grace and mercy, ignorance with regard to the promises and Christ. Such a heart does not receive nor appreciate the message of the forgiveness of sins *gratis* for Christ's sake" (SL IX, 411). "Hearts that are secure and do not feel the wrath of God loathe consolation" (Ap XII 51). For this reason contrition is absolutely necessary; it is the indispensable preparation for the creation of faith. When the thunderbolt of the Law has crushed the secure heart, has brought about the true sorrow and the experience of death—"this then is what it means to begin true repentance . . . that they might know what they were before God, and might acknowledge that they were lost men, and might thus be prepared for the Lord, to receive grace and to expect and accept from Him the forgiveness of sins" (SA-III III). "If the sinners have once come to fear the wrath of God and hell, they are ready to receive the Gospel" (Walther, p. 229). The fact remains, "true contrition must precede" (FC SD III 23).

Without contrition no conversion! There can be no faith, no acceptance of the forgiveness of sins, in a heart that does not recognize the need of forgiveness. Faith and self-righteousness cannot dwell together. "Faith is conceived in the terrors of conscience"

(Ap III 21), and never otherwise. Contrition as a prerequisite for faith is so necessary and indispensable that it may properly be designated as belonging to conversion. "Now, repentance consists properly of these two parts: one is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel" (AC XII, cf. Ap XII 28). "Since, however, a man must first realize that he is subject to eternal damnation on account of his sins before he will accept the Gospel of grace, the preaching of the Law must always precede and accompany the preaching of the Gospel. 'By the Law is the knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:20). . . . Since conversion is effected by the Gospel with the aid of the Law, the inner motions of the heart which go to make up conversion are: (a) the terrors of conscience (*terrores conscientiae*), which arise from the knowledge of sin engendered by the Law (Acts 16:29-30); and (b) the trust of the heart (*fiducia cordis*) in the gracious promise of forgiveness extended to man in the Gospel (Acts 16:31)." (Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, English translation, II, 459 f.)

No conversion without contrition! This sentence, however, may not be equated without further ado with the following: Without contrition there is no forgiveness of sins. This unqualified statement would say that forgiveness of sins is somehow attached to contrition. Scripture, however, most emphatically insists on this second truth: Contrition in no way, either entirely or in part, not even in one thousandth part, produces forgiveness. The terrors of conscience in no manner and in no respect move God to forgive sin. The fear caused by sin and the improvement of life allegedly beginning with this fear do not propitiate God. Only one thing could propitiate God, namely, the blood of Christ, shed for the atonement of our sins for Christ's sake. God is gracious to the sinner for Christ's sake. God has forgiven the world its sins, and by accepting this forgiveness *through* faith the sinner personally appropriates forgiveness. "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law" (Rom. 3:28). Contrition is not an integral part of justification. Those who claim that contrition is the condition and presupposition of forgiveness, that is, that God looks with favor on the sinner because he is sorry for his sin and thus has become a different, a morally better man —

they mingle the works of the Law, the work of man, with justification, and thereby subvert the Christian doctrine of justification. God does not wait until man manifests some good before He justifies him. God "justifies the ungodly." (Rom. 4:5)

Good works do not justify, and the contrition of one who is yet unconverted is not even a good work. It is coupled with hatred against God. Whoever would know and deal with God only on the basis of the Law, which confronts the sinner with nothing but God's wrath, such a one cannot love God. He is at enmity with God. He hates God. "Though as a monk I led a blameless life, I knew myself to be a sinner before God and had a very disturbed conscience. Nor could I have the confidence that God would be appeased by my satisfactions. Therefore I did not love the righteous God who punishes sinners, yes, I hated Him" (Luther, SL XIV, 447). Would God indeed justify on the basis of such godlessness [*Gottlosigkeit*]? Not even the contrition of the Christian can be the basis for justification. A Christian's contrition indeed belongs to the category of good works. The child of God bewails his sins because he loves God. It is a holy contrition. It manifests a God-pleasing hatred against sin. Yet the Christian does not thereby merit the forgiveness of his sins. In common with all other good works, also this phase of sanctification is imperfect, mixed with sin, constantly coupled with slavish fear. And since a Christian's contrition is a consequence of the forgiveness of sins, it cannot be its cause. Only one thing justifies the sinner, namely, the atoning work of Christ accepted by faith.

In the Lutheran Church it is not permissible to say that contrition effects salvation. The Lutheran Confessions teach clearly and definitely: "In like manner, too, in justification before God faith relies neither upon contrition nor upon love or other virtues but upon Christ alone. . . . Moreover, neither contrition nor love or any other virtue, but faith alone is the sole means and instrument by which and through which we can receive and accept the grace of God, the merit of Christ, and the forgiveness of sins, which are offered us in the promise of the Gospel" (FC III 30 f; cf. Ap VI 51 f). "Beware, therefore, that you do not put your confidence in your contrition, or ascribe redemption from sin to your sorrow.

For God regards you with favor not on that account but for the sake of your faith." (Luther, SL XIX, 84; cf. XIII, 546, 1953)

A Christian preacher must be on guard against all formulations that could create the impression that contrition somehow moves God to forgive sins or that forgiveness is dependent on contrition. Is it correct to say: "Christ graciously comforted Peter after Peter had with a flood of bitter tears of repentance confessed the grave guilt of his threefold denial"? Christ did not comfort Peter on the basis that he had confessed his sin with bitter tears. The fact that Peter wept bitterly was a result of the forgiveness which Christ offered him. It remains true that God's heart is not softened by the tears of repentance, neither by those that come from an unconverted broken heart nor by those that proceed from a believing and crushed heart. In the first instance they are not holy tears of repentance but unholy tears of despair. It is indeed true that the bitter tears of repentance shed by the converted are holy, because they arise from a God-pleasing attitude; however, because of the flesh of the Christian they remain impure. Neither the contrition that precedes faith nor that which follows faith is a valid basis of faith.

Nor may the matter be expressed in this way: "Nowhere in all the pages of Holy Scripture is a promise of forgiveness held out to any persons but the penitent and contrite. And since a man cannot possibly believe a promise which has not been made, nor accept a gift which has not been offered, the impenitent man cannot possibly have saving faith. Before he can have it, he must first genuinely acknowledge and lament his sins and earnestly desire deliverance from them; for only then will he have a promise in which to place his trust" (J. Stump, *The Christian Faith*, p. 214). Of course the impenitent man is not a believer. Of course you cannot offer the impenitent sinner the comfort of the Gospel. We may not cast the pearls before the swine. Perhaps Stump wants to say nothing more than this. But under no circumstances may we say that the sinner has the promise of forgiveness, or may trust in it, by the mere fact that he repents of his sin. We must not create the impression that there is no objective, universal forgiveness for all sinners. It would be sad if the sinner would have a promise of forgiveness only when he longs for it. No longing for forgive-

ness for Christ's sake comes into being apart from the offer of this forgiveness. The promise is unconditional.*

The false teaching concerning the saving power of contrition is no small matter, no minor departure from the true doctrine. The chief article of Christian doctrine is at stake. "Here very good attention must be given with a special diligence, if the article of justification is to remain pure, lest that which precedes faith, and that which follows after it, be mingled together or inserted into the article of justification as necessary and belonging to it" (FC III 24; cf. Ep III 11; Ap XII 75). "Let us say it right at the start: there can be no understanding of the Lutheran doctrine of justification when these two things are not equally emphasized: there is no faith that is not preceded by contrition, there is no contrition that is a determining factor in the righteousness of faith." (F. H. R. Frank, *Theologie der Konkordienformel*, II 61)

Furthermore, the certainty of forgiveness, the salvation of the sinner is at stake. The sinner is bound to despair if the certainty of salvation is made in any way to depend on the attitude or the moral condition of man, whether that be in the crass Roman-Jewish or in the more subtle Pietistic-Methodistic way. Let us take the earnest words of Dr. Pieper to heart: "Nothing that precedes faith (contrition), nothing that follows faith (*unio mystica*, sanctification, and good works, etc.), may be co-ordinated and joined with faith as a means of appropriating the remission of sins; otherwise the Christian order of salvation is perverted. [. . .]" (II, 397). Likewise the earnest words of Dr. Walther: "Such sermons have a harmful effect and lead souls astray . . . producing only hypocrites and often driving men to despair" (p. 238; cf. Ap XII 34). Finally, the earnest words of Dr. Luther: "Remember, therefore, that the

* Zahn (*Evangelium Johannes*, 20:23) gives the matter a pronouncedly synergistic turn: "The Gospel proclaims God's general amnesty to man . . . but in principle always on condition of *μετάνοια* and *πίστις* . . . In spite of the universality of God's and Christ's saving intention, the remission of sins proffered by the preacher of the Gospel does not apply to all, but according to Christ's words, only to some, namely, to those who are willing to meet the stated condition." By the way, what a strange thought sequence: a universality of God's saving intention, limited to one class of men! God wants to save all, but only those who are willing and able to meet certain conditions. As is well known, synergism poses as the champion of *gratia universalis*. However, in consequence of its basic principle, synergism rather thoroughly disposes of the universality of God's saving purpose.

keys, or the forgiveness of sins, do not depend on our contrition or worthiness, as the opponents teach and pervert; such teaching is thoroughly Pelagian, Turkish, pagan, Jewish, Anabaptistic, enthusiastic, and Antichristian. On the contrary, our contrition, work, heart, and whatever we may be, must be based on the keys. . . . It is true, you must have contrition, but for you to rely on the forgiveness of sins for that reason and to think that thereby you confirm the work of the keys, would mean to forsake faith and to deny Christ. He wants to forgive your sins and absolve you, not for your sake, but for His own sake, purely by grace, by means of the keys." (SL XIX, 943 f)

II

Does contrition produce the sinner's salvation?

The Romanists and their close relatives teach that contrition merits the forgiveness of sins or somehow moves God to be gracious to the sinner. In addition there are, however, many who do not regard contrition as the means of justification, but let the sinner's salvation begin with contrition, or have the sinner enter the way of life in and through contrition. This manifests itself in many variations. It is said that contrition more or less creates faith; predisposes to faith; produces an attitude inclining toward the Savior; true repentance always grows into faith. It is said that in contrition new motions of life, holy stirrings of the will, manifest themselves; that in and through contrition man's natural condition experiences a change; that contrition is the beginning of improvement, of an ethical transformation; that contrition amounts to half of conversion. We shall document these assertions to show how widespread this view of contrition is, and then we shall point out the destructive character of this error.

F. H. R. Frank states expressly that faith evolves from contrition (p. 65). "Faith evolves from the knowledge of the living God in the manifestation of His divine will of judgment, from the crushing sorrow over sin — the first ray of light which by the power of the Holy Spirit falls upon the conscience of the unconverted." It is true that he says, "contrition does not in itself include faith" (p. 306). But he continues: "By virtue of the spiritual gift on which the enlightenment depends, the passive state in which the contrite person finds himself also at this point contains already

the possibility of assisting the involuntary witness of the conscience by self-determination and thus of progressing from contrition to penitence" (p. 307). Note the ominous terms "self-determination" and "enlightenment." We know the implications of these terms in the language of the Pietists and synergists. It is the Pietistic-synergistic theology which lets faith develop out of contrition and ascribes powers to the "enlightened" and "quickened" man which work toward conversion. [...] A Pietist, H. P. Fresenius, ascribes to the person not yet converted but quickened — one who has come to a knowledge of, and anxiety concerning, his sins — spiritual powers which co-operate in his conversion. "When God thus quickens, man must be alert and properly accept and use the quickening grace. . . . To one who has been awakened God has already given a great measure of light and the power needed to arise fully. The more a man becomes awake and alert, the more concerned he is about his salvation, the more the gracious power of God presses upon his heart. Man must accept this divine power. This acceptance consists in this, that man agrees to let God convert him, that he approves of God's giving him a new heart, yes, that by prayer and supplication he opens his heart, that is, lifts the inclinations and desires of his will to God." At another place he says: "First, the heart of stone is taken away. . . . This hardness is removed when the Spirit of God gives man a godly sorrow over his sins. For through his sorrow the stony heart is ground, crushed, beaten, so that the sorrowing, grieving sinner stops opposing God. . . . In this way all the powers of our salvation are renewed; and this is the first step of grace. The second step consists in this, that God also gives a new spirit. This new spirit signifies the spiritual life which God grants us in regeneration" (*Epistelpredigten*, p. 673 f., 682 f.). According to the Pietistic theory, contrition contains vital powers which overcome evil. The great unrest, grief, and sorrow of contrition are designated as the conflict of repentance, or as the great repentance. This conflict is said "to last only several days in one case, in another, a year or more. Let no one be in a hurry to conclude this conflict. . . . This would mean playing truant from God's school and not seriously pulling out the roots of the evil. . . . Contrition is basically to earn the forgiveness of sins and to eradicate sin" (Meusel, s. v. "Buszkampf").

H. Martensen shares this view of the Pietistic-synergistic "awakening" or "enlightenment," describing it as follows: "Awakening precedes regeneration, but it does not constitute it. Awakening is certainly a work of grace, affecting the entire personality of the man, raising his consciousness to a higher religious state, a state to which he could not raise himself by his own natural powers merely. . . . Grace kindles a new light in his soul (*illuminatio*); the kingdom of God rises within the man; and he looks upon the world and upon himself in a new light; it impresses the will with a grievous sense of sin and corruption (*contritio*), and a life of fellowship with Christ appears to be the highest good. But although regeneration is certainly initiated thus, awakening is a state which precedes regeneration; it is the spirit seeking its home in answer to the effectual call of grace; but it is not yet the permanent indwelling (*inhabitatio*) of grace within the soul. . . . Grace cannot advance toward its goal except through a voluntary act of surrender on the part of the man himself" (*Christian Dogmatics*, p. 384).

W. Rohnert describes the improvement which allegedly begins with contrition in this way: "The will of the new man after conversion cannot possibly remain inactive, cannot refrain from participating in the work of the Holy Spirit by a daily exercise of repentance. Where the grace of God has gripped a heart and works in it, where the beginnings of a new life have been created by the Holy Spirit, inward experiences and motions of life must follow; and sincere contrition over the past life of sin arises in the heart, a yearning and longing for forgiveness, a fighting and wrestling, and in this way the resolve of the prodigal son matures, 'I will arise and go to my father.' New motions of life and holy stirrings of the will manifest themselves, so that man in the power of the Holy Spirit by a voluntary decision of his will now joins in the conflict between spirit and flesh and by daily repentance cleanses himself of the sins that cling to him—the so-called *poenitentia continuata seu quotidiana*. This *conversio activa* is a step by step process, in which the newly awakened spiritual life becomes ever stronger and grows until conversion is complete.—Here there can be no thought of synergism, because the new motions do not originate with the natural powers of man but with

God alone" (*Die Dogmatik der Ev. Luth. Kirche*, p. 356 f.). It is difficult, if not impossible, to follow Rohnert's line of thought. In the first sentence he correctly describes the new man after his conversion. In the second he describes the same person as one who is still in the process of coming to the decision to go to the father. In the third sentence he again speaks of the daily contrition and repentance of the child of God. But in the fourth he describes this person as one in whom conversion is not yet complete. The impossibility of this line of thought is in keeping with the impossibility of this entire fictitious situation. It is simply impossible for a person who is dead, not yet converted, to manifest signs of life before he has become spiritually alive. This much is clear: Rohnert calls contrition, the contrition of one not yet converted, a new motion of life. By speaking of conversion as a progressive process in which the new life expresses itself in contrition, he is operating with a synergistic concept. (His disavowal of synergism does not help matters; even though he does not state that the new motions arise from the natural powers of man, he still presents the natural man — not yet converted — as using them.)

It is characteristic of modern synergism to describe conversion as a process in which contrition constitutes the beginning of conversion. We quote several proponents of this theory. *Lehre und Wehre* (50, pp. 28 ff.) cites an article from *Die Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, in which contrition is called "the beginning of conversion." As the divine Law works contrition, "it draws man away from sin." The article goes on to say: "If man, after he has been called (the first step of conversion), has received such power, then exercises and uses it, God will effect in him the second step, namely, repentance, and God accomplishes this by the preaching of the Law. As soon as God through the preaching of the Law has given man the power to repentance, man can repent in virtue of this power. But, as we noted, man can also wrap this talent, this gift, in a cloth, bury and despise it. But if man makes use of the gift of repentance, God will bring him to the third step, namely, faith, and this by the preaching of the grace of God in Christ Jesus." Accordingly, already before man has come to faith, or is actually converted, he is in possession of spiritual powers! For he is called upon to make the proper use of the gift of repentance, or contrition, which the

Law has created (offered?). If man uses this gift properly, if he sets his powers in motion, he will come to faith.

It is clear that the theory of conversion as a gradual process pictures contrition as contributing to salvation. It is therefore designated the "beginning of conversion." H. Schmid writes: "The acts preceding conversion are more particularly the following: 1. The unconverted and unregenerated man being from his birth under the dominion of sin and his sinful propensities, manifesting themselves boldly in actual sins, the first act of grace aims to divert him from this state of sin and, with this end in view, to beget in him real pain for past sins and a desire to be freed from the dominion which sin has exercised over him, viz., *contrition*. 2. The second act of divine grace is this, that it drives man, alarmed on account of his sins, to take refuge in the merit of Christ, which covers his sin and is accounted as his merit, so that *conversion*, which *commences* [italics mine] in contrition, is finished in *faith*. The former is produced by the preaching of the Law, the latter by the preaching of the Gospel. From what has been said it follows that *conversion*, like *regeneration*, does not take place at once, but is brought about by repeated acts of one and the same grace. This grace is variously designated, as it produces the beginning or the progress of conversion and as it is efficacious with or without human co-operation. In the beginning of conversion man is thus altogether passive; in the further progress of it, however, active in so far as the powers produced by grace must in it be operative. But as these powers are called forth by grace and man can do nothing at all by his natural powers, conversion is therefore to be considered as produced by grace alone." (*Doctrinal Theology*, p. 460 f.)

The foregoing calls for three observations. 1. Some men within the Lutheran Church actually call contrition the beginning of conversion. Before a man has come to faith, he has already in the act of contrition turned away from sin, in whole or in part; has turned to God, at least half way; has half converted himself. 2. Schmid cites the dogmatists in support of his views. It is true, the *later* dogmatists more or less clearly expressed the theory of a process of conversion, of preparatory acts, of contrition, etc., as a preliminary stage of conversion. And this false presentation by the dogmatists of the 17th and 18th centuries is widely current

today. The matter is presented as though the motions arising in contrition were spiritual or salutary motions whereby man is rendered capable, fit, and receptive for faith. (Whoever makes the contrition wrought by the Law a part of conversion, because it is the prerequisite of conversion, speaks in accordance with the Scriptures and the Confessions. This is conversion in the broader sense. But whoever speaks of conversion "in a broader sense," as though conversion began with contrition, speaks contrary to Scripture and the Confessions.) 3. Schmid is not ready without further ado to accept the *pure passive* of the Confessions. [...] He hedges. In a certain sense man is "thus altogether passive." But in a certain regard he is also "so far active." This "activity" of man who is not yet converted is a part of the apparatus of synergism. The *status medius*, that is, the process of conversion, is made to serve as an auxiliary apparatus.

Dr. Stump also feels called upon to qualify the *pure passive*: "Hence, looking at the process as a whole, the Formula of Concord, quoting Luther, declares that in conversion the human will is purely passive. Only God can and does make the unwilling willing; and all the credit of conversion goes to Him and none of it to man. On the other hand, when the process of conversion is looked at in detail, it is evident that as the process proceeds, there is a certain activity on the part of man. If the process is to be completed and is to end in actual conversion, the new powers which the Holy Spirit gradually gives to the sinner must be used in that conflict between the flesh and the spirit which ensues previous to the actual decision against sin and for God. But this activity on man's part is produced by the Holy Spirit and is exercised through new powers given by Him and not at all through powers which are native or natural to man" (pp. 257 f.). Thus Stump teaches that spiritually good powers are set in motion in the still unconverted man (before "actual conversion"), that a conflict takes place between flesh and spirit, a conflict of repentance, of contrition against sin.

The process of conversion is described by L. S. Keyser (*A Manual of Christian Ethics*, p. 103 f.) as follows: "a) *Vocation*. This is the call of God to awaken the sinner to his unsaved condition. It is a holy calling to forsake sin and seek salvation. b) *Illumina-*

tion. In this process the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, uses the Law to convict the sinner of his sins and to show him his moral and spiritual helplessness. "Through the Law cometh the knowledge of sin." c) *Repentance, or godly sorrow for sin*. This state is the result of the previous process. It is highly ethical because it means not only contrition, but also a desire to be freed from the unethical status. Repentance (*metanoia*) means a change of mind, that is, of the intellect, the heart, and the will. d) *Passive faith*. The convicted sinner may struggle and try to save himself for a time, as Luther did, but until he is willing to surrender to God, who alone can save him, the work will not proceed. The Holy Spirit operates upon him until he passively permits God to save him; then the next divine function takes place." All of this takes place in one who is still unregenerated; for not until then follows: "e) *Regeneration*. As soon as the convicted sinner gives himself up completely into God's hands, the Holy Spirit begets the new life within him."

According to this presentation, a process of conversion develops in the unregenerate, so that spiritually good powers are alive in the contrition of the unconverted, that the change of mind (*metanoia*) has already started with contrition, that contrition is the beginning of conversion. It is clear that in this process of conversion the synergistic self-surrender to God is of decisive significance. "As soon as the convicted sinner gives himself up completely into God's hands," then and only then the Holy Spirit creates the real new life of regeneration.

Professor O. Hallesby (Oslo) supports the same view in his book on conscience. Sometimes he describes the necessity of contrition correctly. Contrition is necessary "to break our own inherent and deeply rooted confidence." But then he continues: "Through this awakening God has now made possible the *conversion* of the awakened soul. The latter must now choose. He is free to choose *whatever* he wills. . . . Men had been 'killed' by the Law and therefore felt the need of the Gospel, whereby they also acquired the *inner qualifications* [italics my own] for believing in the Gospel. . . . Through the Word and the newborn conscience God makes known His will to sinful man. Then the sinner must choose whether to submit to the categorical and absolute judgment of his

conscience or, in rebelliousness and dissimulation, seek to evade the judgment of his conscience. If he chooses to submit, faith is born within him. . . . As the Gospel is then preached to the awakened soul, who now, by believing in the Law of God, has received new ears with which to hear the Gospel, we see how faith in the grace of God begins to grow." (O. Hallesby, *Conscience*, pp. 67—98)

P. L. Mellenbruch puts it thus: "Contrition has no merit in itself. It does not pay the penalty for sin any more than contrition for theft or murder will pay the penalty before a civil court. [This is excellent!] Contrition does, however, put the person in a position to lay hold of the forgiveness provided in and through Jesus Christ. [This could be correctly understood, but he continues:] Contrition serves as a deterrent from sin. Having experienced contrition, the sinner is thereby strengthened, at least to some extent, against the temptations which continually beset him. Contrition opens the way for faith. [Also this last sentence permits a correct interpretation. But observe what follows:] When the individual ceases to harden his heart, and when he acknowledges his sin and weakness, he instinctively turns in trust to his God." (*The Doctrines of Christianity*, p. 110)

It is, therefore, a fact that within the Lutheran Church contrition that precedes faith is called a part of conversion, not in the sense that it is the necessary prerequisite for faith but in the sense that conversion is effected *by contrition and faith*. One more reference to such a view: "Repentance is the first (negative) aspect, the basic beginning; faith is the (positive) completion of conversion. Thus Scripture pictures repentance as the basis within man for the new life. The inner process of conversion, as wrought by God, begins with the self-judgment of repentance, which consists in the change of mind that takes place in the knowledge of, and sorrow over, sin and in the earnest purpose to break with sin in order to live unto God" (Luthardt-Jelke, *Kompndium der Dogmatik*, par. 65). Here repentance means contrition. This is clear from the added exposition: "The signs of a true contrition within man are: forsaking evil and longing for sanctification. Now, this contrition, this knowledge of sin and anxiety regarding sin, etc., is the basic beginning of conversion. By means of the *motus praeparatorii* (of which the terrors of conscience are a part) "a real

receptivity and the possibility of self-determination for salvation is brought about." (Par. 64)

This shows why this theory of a process of conversion, beginning with contrition, is so popular. It leaves ample room for synergistic self-determination. There can be no doubt regarding Luthardt's synergistic way of thinking. He expressly states in the same paragraph: "Scripture designates conversion partly as a work of grace, partly as an achievement of man." Dr. Jelke (op. cit.) adds, "The problem of conversion concerns the relation of the divine operation of grace to man's free attitude." — By the way, we find it difficult to understand why repentance (contrition) is called the *negative* side of conversion. This expression can be understood correctly if by "negative" we mean that the obstacle of self-righteousness and security must be removed. Thus Hollaz uses a similar term: "Contrition is not the positive or causal means of kindling faith, but is only the privative means by which . . . the obstacles which otherwise would impede the kindling of faith are removed" (quoted in Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, p. 468). In the presentation by Jelke, however, "negative" is used to designate "real receptivity," the power of "self-determination," the beginning of conversion. And that is certainly something positive. (Cf. *Lehre und Wehre*, LIV, 338 for an excellent summary)

The above-mentioned theologians let salvation begin with contrition in as far as contrition allegedly makes the heart receptive and willing for faith. Others, again, dispense more or less with this fictitious relationship of contrition to conversion, but describe contrition as a holy, God-pleasing change of heart and transformation as a result of which man does what is good and right. If, however, the contrition, produced by the Law, is of such a nature, then indeed salvation begins with it. Man is no longer walking the way of sin and perdition, but the way of life. "The first effect of the knowledge of self is contrition, or grief and sorrow over our sins. . . . The contrite sinner of this frame of mind abhors the previous deceptions of selfishness, forsakes the way of perdition, returns to the way of God, the narrow way, which the godly walk, Matt. 7:14, and seeks the rest and salvation which he would not and could not find in the world" (August Hahn, *Lehrbuch des christlichen Glaubens*, 1828, p. 504 f.). In the next paragraph, however, Hahn correctly

presents the function of contrition — but he should have described it differently in the first place. [...]

In his book, *The Ethic of Jesus*, p. 175, J. Stalker says: "As has been seen above, the first step upwards, out of unrighteousness towards Christian character, is repentance; and now we go on to the second, which is faith." Stalker does not exactly identify "repentance" with "contrition." He would like to regard "repentance" as equivalent to "conversion." However, as he has just demonstrated, this "repentance" precedes faith, includes "contrition," and constitutes the first step from ungodliness to the Christian life, which he describes as follows: "The prodigal 'came to himself'; and this striking phrase may be said to show the first element in repentance to be awakening . . . a vision of good. . . . A fourth element is confession. . . . Confession deepens the sense of sin in the mind of him who confesses. It separates man from sin, being a kind of violent ejection of the latter. . . . The fear of danger must be strong enough to force the prodigal to his feet and the vision of good attractive enough to draw him on in the right direction. . . . In the woman who was a sinner we see repentance in its purest form. It was in flight from a besetting sin and a lost life and in pursuit of a better life, the vision of which had risen before her eyes, that she ventured in where she dared not well be seen" (p. 160 ff.). Note well that all this [in his opinion] takes place before faith is present in the heart!

J. A. W. Haas treats the matter in exactly the same way in his book, *The Truth of Faith*. On page 110 he speaks of "faith following repentance." What precedes faith is described thus: "Through repentance men realize their real selves and can come to happiness and eternal life. . . . The substance of real repentance is to be sorry after a godly manner, and as God would have an honest change of mind, heart, and purpose. . . . There must be, as in the case of the publican, honest, heartfelt humiliation before God, Luke 18:13, which exhibits itself in its sincerity through actual deeds of restitution when the wrong can be partly righted."

In this connection we should also call attention to a remark in the *Kompendium* of Luthardt-Jelke (p. 34): "For our concept of repentance we must not overlook the present significance of Kierkegaard, who places the idea of contrition into the center of his

theology. In contrition Kierkegaard sees the religious relation to God beginning to express itself. According to him contrition amounts to the fitting expression for complete love to God. All knowledge, and therefore all love to God, depend on contrition." In answer to this crass perversion of contrition and its significance Dr. Jelke has only this comment: "This is without doubt a one-sided view of Christianity; yet it is a view that has something to say to our generation."

The Christian Church cannot tolerate the doctrine that contrition effects salvation, certainly not in the form that contrition produces the forgiveness of sins. Nor in the form that the sinner's salvation begins in and with contrition. Also this form of the false doctrine concerning contrition perverts the order of salvation. [. . .]

It perverts the order of salvation. It confounds the doctrine of conversion. The conversion of the sinner, this miracle of God by which the sinner gains possession of salvation, is brought about by the creation of faith in the heart of the sinner. "A great number believed and turned unto the Lord" (Acts 11:21). By virtue of the fact that they came to faith (πιστεύσας) they turned to the Lord. "Even when we were dead in sins, hath [He] quickened us together with Christ . . . and raised us up together. . . . For by grace are ye saved *through faith*" (Eph. 2:5 ff.). "Wherein also ye are risen with Him *through the faith* of the operation of God" (Col. 2:12). Before there is faith, man is unconverted. We may not tell him that he is converted because of his contrition, nor may we tell him that he is half converted or that conversion has begun. We may not tell him that he is on the way of salvation with *one* foot. To those who are not saved by faith the apostle says that they are dead in sin (Eph. 2:5 f.), and the word "dead" does not mean "half dead," either in a physical or in a spiritual sense. There is no halfway condition between death and life, either in the natural or in the spiritual realm. There is no *status medius*, no process of conversion which allows us to describe a man who is indeed not yet converted, that is, not entirely converted, as one who nevertheless feels spiritual motions in himself and by the proper use of these vital powers works himself through to life. Scripture has only *one* term for the unconverted, namely, "when ye were dead." Pelagianism describes unconverted man in different terms. It ascribes

spiritual powers to him. To say that the unconverted brings about his conversion by the use of spiritual powers originates in Pelagian thinking. It is also contrary to the Scriptural doctrine of conversion to say that contrition connotes man's moral transformation, or that it transports him into a morally better condition. Moral improvement depends on *faith*, the essence of conversion. Sanctification is a *fruit* of conversion, of faith. There is nothing good in man before faith. Rationalism and Romanism do not hesitate to say: "The sorrow of repentance reacts on the soul, strengthening it to meet the new task of moral reformation." Lutherans do not use such language.

The doctrine of the saving efficacy of contrition perverts the order of salvation. It mingles Law and Gospel. The Gospel alone creates faith (Rom. 10:8, 17; 1 Cor. 1:21-23; 2:2-5). "The Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel." ". . . the Gospel, which alone properly teaches and commands to believe in Christ" (FC SD V 19). ". . . through the preaching and consideration of the Holy Gospel concerning the gracious forgiveness of sins in Christ a spark of faith is kindled in him" (FC SD II 54). The Law can neither create faith nor predispose man to it. The Law can only kill (2 Cor. 3:6). How can contrition, which is worked by the Law, predispose to faith, let alone create it? How can the desire for grace, this "spark of faith," grow out of contrition and fear created by the terrifying Law? That is contrary to Scripture and the order of salvation. We may not assign to the Law the function of the Gospel. Gerberding's statement, "True repentance always grows into faith and true faith presupposes penitence" (*The Way of Salvation*, p. 142), is entirely correct as far as the second statement is concerned, but completely wrong in the first part, unless "contrition" means that contrition only to which faith is added. Frank is wrong in saying that "faith develops from such a feeling." Hallesby is wrong in saying, "Faith is born out of distress of conscience" (*Conscience*, p. 109). The Apology is correct in saying: "Faith is conceived in the terrors of conscience" (III 21); but the Apology deliberately says "in," not "out of," the terrors of conscience. Fresenius should not say that it is "agreeable" to one terrified by the Law of God "to be converted by God, that it pleases him when God gives him a different heart." To one who has not yet come to faith nothing that God does is

agreeable. It is not correct to say that the Law softens the heart by working contrition. The thunderbolt of the Law shatters the heart, self-righteousness and self-reliance, but it does not soften the heart. Only the Gospel can do this.

Similarly it is a mingling of Law and Gospel to call the contrition that is effected by the Law the beginning of improvement. The Law can only kill. Only the Gospel makes alive (2 Cor. 3:6). Furthermore, the evidences of life, holy motions of the will, God-pleasing drives and resolutions, are found only in one whom the Gospel has quickened. In the unconverted the Law can only arouse and increase sin (Rom. 7:5, 8). In the sinner who is struck by the curse of the Law there is no trace of love to God. He can only curse God. The more he recognizes his sinful condition, the more his hatred against God increases. "It is servile fear when faith does not sustain the anxious heart" (Ap XVI 38). Surely we cannot expect good motions to develop in such a heart estranged from God and inimical to God. The contrition of the Law in no way brings the sinner to the way of improvement, of salvation. "The more we see our sin, the more guilty our conscience becomes, the more our flight from God increases. The knowledge of sin in this sense signifies not the first step toward improvement, but the last step into perdition" (E. Schott, *Fleisch und Geist nach Luthers Lehre*, p. 35). Luther: "Contritus lege tantum abest, ut perveniat ad gratiam, ut longius ab ea discedat. Petrus, si diutius in illa contritione legis mansisset et Dominus eum non respexisset, idem illi accidisset, quod Iudae, id est, desperatio et mors. — . . . homo istos [sc. terrores legis] sentiens odit Deum et iniustum iudicat." "But the chief office or force of the Law is that it reveal original sin with all its fruits, and show man how very low his nature has fallen, and has become utterly corrupted; . . . In this way he becomes terrified, is humbled, desponds, despairs, and anxiously desires aid, but sees no escape; he begins to be an enemy of God, and to murmur, etc. This is what Paul says, Rom. 4:15: 'The Law worketh wrath.' And Rom. 5:20: 'Sin is increased by the Law'" (SA-III II 4). The improvement of man, his moral betterment, begins only after the Gospel of the gracious forgiveness of sins has penetrated his heart, has worked faith. "God out of His infinite goodness and mercy comes first to us, and causes His Holy Gospel to be preached,

whereby the Holy Ghost desires to work and accomplish in us this conversion and renewal, and through preaching and meditation upon His Word kindles in us faith *and other godly virtues*" (FC SD II 71). The contrition of a believing child of God is something good and produces good. It proceeds from the Spirit. But there is nothing holy in the flesh, and the Law cannot bring anything holy either out of this flesh or into it. The preparatory motions are certainly necessary, but they may not on that account be characterized as good, spiritual motions (cf. Pieper, 461, fn. 10). Whoever makes contrition the beginning of betterment, or expects the Law to produce holy and good intentions, transfers the office of the Gospel to the Law.

He perverts the order of salvation. [. . .] He creates only confusion. He leads the sinner astray. If the sinner would take seriously this theory of the salutary efficacy of contrition — and the matter is very serious for the terrified sinner — he will either despair or become carnally secure. The sinner who has been taught to believe that good motions must manifest themselves in his heart in the course of contrition finds himself in a dreadful situation. His conscience is aroused, and he knows only too well that no good thing dwells in him. Then he is told about holy resolutions of his will. But when nothing like that comes to pass, he despairs. Of course, the sinner should despair of himself. God deals with him in that way. By the Law, God brings him to the knowledge that there is nothing good whatever in him. We are fully justified in disabusing the sinner's mind of the idea that there is something good in him. But no man may assume the responsibility for telling the terrified sinner that God will deal with him henceforth on the basis of the Gospel, as soon as certain good resolutions of the will are manifest as a result of the preaching of the Law. A sinner thus advised will never apply the Gospel to himself. In the Apology the sinner receives this instruction: "Before the writings of Luther appeared, the doctrine of repentance was very much confused. . . . the Law only accuses and terrifies consciences. . . . How will men love God in true terrors when they feel the terrible and inexpressible wrath of God? What else than despair do those teach who in these terrors display only the Law?" (Op XII 5 34). What shall we say of the instruction that is now given the sinner: It is God's order

of salvation that, first of all, God-pleasing motions must appear as a result of the preaching of the Law and that then God would come with the Gospel? This would make the sinner wait too long — too long — for the Gospel.

The damage may appear also in another form. The ill-advised sinner may easily relapse into a deadly security. He had taken the matter seriously. He had been mortally terrified. And now he is told that this fear and sorrow created by the Law is something good, something holy, something God-pleasing. If he believes this, he will claim some credit for himself. The flesh cannot do otherwise. The result is that feelings of security manifest themselves. He finds himself in a situation where he is confronted by nothing but wrath and perdition, but is of the opinion that matters have taken a turn for the better. What Luther urged upon the semi-Pelagian Erasmus may be applied also here: "As long as a man is convinced that he can contribute something to his salvation, be it ever so little, he continues to trust in himself and does not utterly despair of himself. Hence he does not humble himself before God, but plans some work at some time and some place whereby he hopes, or at least desires, finally to obtain salvation" (SL XVIII, 1715).

This application results: Since the unconverted is led to believe that he has entered the way of life by his contrition, he no longer despairs entirely of himself, and to that extent the entrance of the Gospel into his heart is blocked. Rather "here man must hear such a sentence as this: you are all of no account, whether you be manifest sinners or saints; you must all become different and do otherwise than you now are and are doing, whether you are as great, wise, powerful, and holy as you may be. Here no one is godly" (SA-III III 3). As long as the sinner is under the Law, no mention should be made to him of the beginning of improvement. Here no one is godly, in no respect. If we speak otherwise, the Law cannot perform its full function and neither can the Gospel.

It is true, you must have contrition. This is absolutely necessary. But it is not a part of Christian theology to say that man arrives at a better state by means of contrition, in other words, by way of the Law. This language comes from Pelagianism.

(To be continued)