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Conversion

More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The word “conversion” is used in many different ways throughout our society. We talk about a third down conversion, or the conversion from dollars to euros, miles to kilometers, or degrees Fahrenheit to degrees Celsius. We convert from Microsoft Windows 8.1 to Windows 10 or from a PC to a Mac. We talk about converting our basement into a game room, or converting our traditional IRA into a Roth IRA. When people change churches, they often say, “I’m a convert” from being a Roman Catholic to being a Lutheran.

In most of these cases we would say that we did the conversion; we looked at a chart or read a review. We credit ourselves with making an evaluation of the pros and cons and

then deciding whether to make a conversion or not. With this as the background, and with our own sinful nature, it is not surprising that we carry a self-centered definition of “conversion” into our reading of God’s Word.

As we study God’s Word, however, we learn about a gracious and merciful God who does for us those things that we are unwilling and unable to do for ourselves. The goal of this study will be, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to understand “conversion” from God’s perspective. After being instructed by the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, we will look at how understanding God’s use of “conversion” and associated words instructs us in teaching and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

In Acts 15 we read that Paul and Barnabas were sent from their congregation in Antioch to Jerusalem to give an account to the apostles and elders of their first missionary journey: “So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers” (Acts 15:3).¹

The word “conversion” is translated from the Greek ἐπιστροφήν. As we consider the meaning of this word, Luke tells us that hearing about the conversion of the Gentiles brought joy to the brothers who heard about it.

Ἐπιστροφή, according to the Greek-English Lexicon,² means “conversion” and also “turning,” as in “turning towards.” The associated verb is ἐπιστρέφω, meaning “turn,” “turn around.” The brothers therefore had great joy because the Gentiles were somehow turned. Questions that arise: What were they turned from? How were they turned?

As the Lord spoke to the people of Israel, He warned them about turning in the wrong direction — turning toward other gods, and other ways of life: “Do not turn to idols or make for yourself any gods of cast metal” (Lev. 19:4); “Take

care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them” (Deut. 11:16).

Neither God’s warning nor His Law kept the people of Israel from turning away from Him. The psalmist writes, “The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one” (Ps. 14:2–3).

Isaiah confesses for all the Israelites that “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned — every one — to his own way” (Is. 53:6a). First, the shepherds that the Lord placed over His people turned and went their own way: “Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep” (Ezek. 34:2b–3).

Not only did they fail to feed the sheep, but they turned them away from the Lord: “My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains. From mountain to hill they have gone. They have forgotten their fold” (Jer. 50:6; cf. Ezek. 34:6). Turning away from the Lord brings no joy in heaven or on earth.

While all turn and go their own way, the Lord in His mercy and grace comes to His people, wanting them to return to Him. The Old Testament reveals to us a God who calls to His people, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of

1 The English Standard Version (ESV). All Scripture references will come from this version unless otherwise noted.

2 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952).

the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (Is. 45:22).³ Over and over again, through the prophets, the Lord called to the people of Israel: “Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek. 33:11).

The Lord said to Jeremiah, “Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, ‘Return, faithless Israel, declares the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the LORD; I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God’” (Jer. 3:12–13a).

The Lord spoke through the prophet Joel: “Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster” (Joel 2:12–13). Zechariah wrote, “Return to me, says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 1:3b).

The prophet Malachi wrote for the Lord: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me” (Mal. 3:6–7a).

Next came John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who called for the people to repent, to turn to the Lord who was coming to redeem His people. Then, finally, the Living Word of God, the beloved Son of the Father, came to call people back, to call them to repent, wanting them to turn to Him: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2a).

It is God’s desire that we turn away from our own ways and turn to Him. The question is this: If we are lost sheep, if we are enemies of God, and if we are dead in our trespasses, how can we turn around? The man lying dead on the operating table cannot restart his heart.

God’s Word tells us how this can happen. In His Word we hear that He is the One who turns us around, the One who converts us from going our own way to seeking His forgiving mercy and life-giving grace. King David acknowledges that it is the Lord who turns us, who restores us: “The Lord is my shepherd. ... He restores my soul” (Ps. 23:1a, 3a); “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10).

David sees his hope and joy in the Lord restoring and renewing him. He cries to God for mercy and forgiveness because God has revealed Himself as merciful and abounding in steadfast love. David acknowledges that it is God who can wash him thoroughly from his iniquity and cleanse him from his sin.

In the book of Ezekiel, the Lord pronounces His promise to restore the lost sheep. In Ezekiel 34, after God announces His judgment on the unfaithful shepherds of Israel, He announces, “Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ... I will rescue them. ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed” (vv. 11, 12b, 16a).

The Lord continues describing what He will do for the people of Israel who sinned against Him:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:25–27).

If there was doubt in the minds of the Israelites, the Lord gave Ezekiel the vision of the valley of dry bones. Dead bones were brought back to life so that the people of Israel could know that the Lord could and would bring them back from death, the wages for their sins (Ezekiel 37).

Then the Lord Jesus Christ Himself speaks: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10); “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (John 10:11, 16a). Jesus will bring, will turn, all to Him as He speaks the Good News.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, “Unless one is born again (born from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God. ... Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5). Just as we have nothing to do with our birth of flesh and blood, the Lord is the One who must convert us, give us new life. The Lord Himself is the One who turns us around, causing the conversion of our hearts, giving us a new life.

Paul writes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God” (2 Cor. 5:17–18a). The report of joy among the brothers (Acts 15:3) reminds us of Jesus’ teaching in Luke 15 that there will be joy in heaven over sinners who repent.

³ The Greek verb for “turn” and “return” in the subsequent passages from the prophets is ἐπιστρέφω in the Septuagint.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

In the Lutheran Confessions, there is much said about “conversion,” often in conjunction with repentance, faith and new obedience. It is first mentioned in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, but is most often written about in the Formula of Concord, particularly in the articles dealing with free will. The Affirmative and Negative Theses of the Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article II: Concerning the Free Will contrast how true conversion/regeneration happens and how it does not happen.

Affirmative Theses in summary:

1. “Human reason and understanding are blind in spiritual matters and understand nothing on the basis of their own powers.”⁴
2. “As little as a corpse can make itself alive for bodily, earthly life, so little can people who through sin are spiritually dead raise themselves up to a spiritual life, as it is written, ‘When we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ’ [Eph. 2:5].”⁵
3. “God the Holy Spirit does not effect conversion without means, but he uses the preaching and the hearing of God’s Word to accomplish it.”⁶

Negative Theses in summary:

1. We reject “The mad invention of the philosophers who are called Stoics, as well as the Manichaeans, who taught that everything that happens has to happen just so and could not happen in any other way.”⁷
2. We reject the Pelagians “who taught that human beings could convert themselves to God ... out of their own powers apart from the grace of God.”⁸
3. We reject the Semi-Pelagians “who teach that human beings can initiate their conversion by their own powers, but cannot complete it without the grace of the Holy Spirit.”⁹

4. We reject that a human being, once God has started conversion by preaching the Word and offering grace, has some natural power to cooperate in accepting God’s grace.¹⁰
5. We reject “that the human being, after rebirth, can keep God’s law perfectly ... and that this fulfilling of the law constitutes our righteousness ... with which we merit eternal life.”¹¹
6. We reject and condemn “the error of the Enthusiasts ... [that they are drawn to God] without the hearing of God’s Word.”¹²
7. We reject “that in conversion ... God completely destroys the substance and essence of the old creature.”¹³
8. We reject statements that suggest that conversion happens with the willingness of the human being. We teach, however, that God makes willing people out of unwilling people, who then cooperate in the works of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴
9. We reject that before conversion the will of a person is anything but passive.¹⁵

In the Formula of Concord, the Solid Declaration, the teaching about “conversion” is continued in more detail. It is repeatedly taught that “before people are enlightened, converted, reborn, renewed, and drawn back to God by the Holy Spirit, they cannot in and of themselves, out of their own natural powers, begin, effect, or accomplish anything in spiritual matters for their own conversion or rebirth, any more than a stone or block of wood or piece of clay [Is. 45:9; 64:8; Jer. 18:6; Rom. 9:19–24] can.”¹⁶

An important teaching concerning preaching/teaching is found in the Solid Declaration. The work of the preacher and the desire of the hearer would be in vain “if the power and action of the Holy Spirit were not added to them.”¹⁷ “Neither the preacher nor the hearer should doubt this grace and activity of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸

4 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 491.

5 Ibid., 492.

6 Ibid., 492.

7 Ibid., 492.

8 Ibid., 493.

9 Ibid., 493.

10 A summary by the author of the study.

11 Kolb et al., *The Book of Concord*, 493.

12 Ibid., 493.

13 Ibid., 493.

14 A summary by the author of the study.

15 A summary by the author of the study.

16 Kolb et al., *The Book of Concord*, 548–549.

17 Ibid., 554.

18 Ibid., 554.

We also read in the Solid Declaration that true conversion includes, as we state in the liturgy, delighting in God's will and walking in His ways.¹⁹ In addition, we read that although a person cannot cooperate in "conversion," a person can reject the grace of the Holy Spirit that gives faith, the essence of "conversion."²⁰

When considering Law and Gospel in the "conversion" of man, FC SD V: Concerning Law and Gospel teaches that recognizing one's sin through the preaching of the Law "is not sufficient for a salutary conversion to God, if faith in

Christ is not joined to it. The comforting proclamation of the holy gospel offers [Christ's] merit to all repentant sinners whom the proclamation of the law has terrified."²¹

In conclusion, Luther in the catechesis of the Small Catechism summarizes "conversion": "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith."²²

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE TERM

As noted in the focus of this study, the non-Biblical use of the word "conversion" most often makes us the agent of the conversion. Against the voice of Scripture, we hear these claims: "I have decided to follow Jesus" or "I have given my heart to the Lord." If we believe that coming to faith is a matter of our own will, not only do we contradict God's Word, but the foundation of our faith is subject to the weakness of our sinful nature.

Dangers come from trusting in ourselves as the one who accepts Jesus as our Savior:

1. If we are responsible for the faith that believes, then how is this not a good work? This leads to a faith that will ask how much more I must do to be righteous before God, a faith that asks where Christ's merits end and what I must do to finish my salvation. True conversion, turning to God, can only happen if Christ fully and completely paid the price for our sins. Without Christ's atonement on the cross, there is no hope that God will be merciful.
2. If our faith is based on our own reason, then what happens when our faith is challenged by suffering or a troubled conscience? If faith is not a perfect gift from God, then we will question if our faith is strong enough to be saving faith. If we trust that faith is based on our decision rather than a rebirth by water and the Spirit, there is always room for Satan to ask, "Are you sure?"

There is a wonderful connection between teaching the Law and Gospel, teaching about repentance and teaching about conversion. The Law convicts the sinner and brings the sorrow of repentance. The Gospel comforts the sinner through repentant faith. The Holy Spirit converts the sinner by the Law, bringing him or her to true sorrow, and by the Gospel placing faith in Christ in his or her heart.

The Spirit turns us toward the person and work of Christ and gives us faith to believe. With faith believers see that the Son of God came down from heaven for them, that Jesus lived His life in perfect obedience to the will of the Father for them, and that He suffered and died for them, taking upon Himself their sins and giving to them His righteousness.

Conversion is the bestowing of faith on the sinner.

¹⁹ A summary by the author of the study.

²⁰ A summary by the author of the study.

²¹ Kolb et al., *The Book of Concord*, 582-583.

²² *Ibid.*, 355.

DISCUSSION

1. What comfort must the pastor take because the Holy Spirit is the one who converts the sinner? How can this help in preparing sermons?
2. In what way can the pastor teach about the “joy of salvation” prayed for in Psalm 51 when teaching about conversion? How can this joy make a difference in a congregation?
3. How does understanding that the Spirit works through means provide an opportunity to encourage those who are undergoing suffering or living with a troubled conscience?
4. J. T. Muller writes in his *Christian Dogmatics* about “continued conversion.”²³ What would be some theses, affirmative and negative, that would be helpful when teaching about the need for “continued conversion”?

SUMMARY

We preach, teach and confess that the human being is unable to fulfill the law and therefore is unable to be saved by his or her good works. What we are unable to do, God in His mercy has done for us by taking on human flesh and blood. He made the great exchange, taking upon Himself our sin and giving to us His righteousness.

Before conversion, the human being is also unable to believe that salvation is a free gift, that Christ’s life and death free us from sin and death. What we are unable to do, God in His mercy once again does for us by giving us the gift of faith. We are given the gift of faith so that we can be assured it is true saving faith.

²³ John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics: A Handbook of Doctrinal Theology for Pastors, Teachers, and Laymen* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), 353-354.