

CONVERSION

(By Pastor W. B. Uebergang)

"Conversion" by Pastor W. B. Uebergang.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pastor W. Uebergang

Pastor W. Uebergang was born on 16th Dec., 1897, at Murtoa, Victoria, being baptized by Pastor W. Peters. From 1913 to 1921, he studied for the ministry at Concordia College and Seminary, Adelaide, being ordained on January 5th, 1922. He accepted a call to Aubigny, Queensland, being installed by Pastor Emil Darsow. He served here until 1930, when he was called to Toowoomba where he laboured for 17 years. In 1947 he accepted a call to Ipswich, where he worked in the Lord's vineyard until shortly before his death in 1960 at age 62 years. His marriage to Ruth (nee Linke) had been blessed with one son and three daughters.

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Dear Fathers and Brethren in Christ,

Doctrinal papers at our Synodical Conventions are a necessity. For if the various congregations in our Synod united, because they felt assured that they were one in faith, then this unity in faith, which alone makes true Synodical fellowship possible, must also be preserved. And one of the most convenient ways to do this is to treat in detail of some doctrine of Holy Writ at our Synodical Conventions, where, under normal conditions, every congregation in Synod is represented by one or more delegates. And doctrinal papers are also pleasing to God. It is God's Will that we should confess our faith before the world. And especially pleasing to Him is it, when His Christians in unity confess their faith in His Word. This we do at our Synodical Conventions, when we discuss a doctrine of God's Word in detail, and then confess our united adherence to the doctrine discussed. In this manner, we as a Synod bear testimony to the truth. And since we find that as the end draws nearer false teachers are becoming ever more active in spreading erroneous doctrines, we, as a Synod that professes to have the pure teaching of God's Word, must also become more interested and more active in laying before the world, clearly and fearlessly, the pure doctrine of the Bible. The doctrine which this paper places before Synod for deliberation and discussion is the doctrine of

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The doctrine is dealt with under the following four theses:-

- I. No sinner can enter eternal life unless he be converted.
- II. Conversion is the renewing of the heart of man through faith.
- III. Conversion is in all respects and in every part alone the work of God, and in this work the person to be converted cannot in any way help or cooperate.
- IV. The means which God uses to effect a sinner's conversion are His Word and Holy Baptism.

THESIS I

No sinner can enter eternal life
unless he be converted.

By Adam's transgression in Paradise the whole human race became sinful, for the sin which Adam there committed, he committed as the father and representative of the whole human race. When Adam forsook his Lord, all his children, who were to come from his loins, also forsook God. The Lord says, Rom.5:19, "By one man's disobedience many were made sinners." The sainted Dr. A.L. Graebner writes with reference to this text as follows, "The many who were in Adam, when he sinned, were constituted sinners, through that first act of disobedience at the time when it was committed. All the millions of Adam's children were accounted sinners, because in Adam they had as truly, though not in the same manner... been implicated in an act of disobedience" (Theol. Quarterly vol.iii, p.152).

Furthermore when Adam sinned, his whole nature became corrupt and depraved. The righteousness and holiness with which he was created, was completely lost. Instead of remaining God's friend and looking upon God as his friend, Adam became God's enemy and considered God to be his enemy. His love was no longer centred on God and on things pleasing to God, but it was now centred on himself and on those things which are an abhorrence to God. His understanding was no longer perfect, as it had been created, but it became darkened and foolish, so that Adam thought he could hide from God, or at least convince God that his guilt was not as great as the guilt of his wife. His will, which was once in conformity with God's, now became opposed to the Lord's will. His

works which were once wholly good, now became totally bad in the Lord's sight. And whilst Adam was once in every part free from sin, he now, after the fall, was altogether under the rule of sin, and instead of wishing to be freed from this power of sin, he found pleasure in serving it. Thus did Adam's whole nature become totally changed through the fall in Paradise.

This total depravity of Adam's nature at once became hereditary. That a sinful Adam should beget sinless children was an impossibility. Job says, ch.14:4, "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" Not one. The depravity which permeated Adam's whole nature in consequence of the fall, has been inherited by every one of Adam's descendants, and it is still the certain and first inheritance of all the unborn races of mankind, for the Saviour has said, John 3:6, "That which is born of flesh is flesh." The Saviour does not here speak of the flesh of the body, but the word "flesh" here means the sinful human nature with its constant hankering after sin and with its inherent rebellion against God.

This depraved and rebellious nature all descendants of Adam receive by conception and birth. They have by nature, no holiness and righteousness of their own (Isaiah 64:6,7). They have by nature a mind which is at enmity with God (Rom.8:7). They have, by nature, an understanding which is darkened and blind in spiritual and divine things (Eph.4:18; 5:8; 1 Cor.2:14). By nature they have a love and desires which are ever drawing them away from God to those things which are sinful and an abomination to the Lord (Gen.6:5; 8:21). And by nature their will is opposed to the will of God (Rom.8:7; 5:10).

Such is the nature of every child of Adam, when it enters this world, says Scripture, and, as Christians who accept every Word of Scripture as divine truth, we must hold fast to this truth of original sin over against those who, following their own darkened understanding, deny the doctrine of original sin.

It is self-evident that man in this sinful state cannot be saved. The Saviour has expressly said, John 3:3, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee: Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

This original sin is the fountain of actual sins, and since man's very nature is sinful, unconverted man cannot do anything else but sin. He cannot do otherwise but sin continuously. For every unconverted sinner is dead in trespasses and sin, says God, Eph.2:1. Not only is the natural state of his heart and soul wicked and sinful, but also all his faculties, all his senses and all his powers are helplessly in the service of sin. With an ear quite deaf to the voice of God, it is ever quick to hear the alluring voice of sin. With a reason obstinate and blind in divine things, it is ever joyously active in shrewdly and keenly planning wicked and sinful schemes. And with feet ever hastening away from God, they are ever swiftly in pursuit of sin.

From this helpless slavery in the service of sin, man cannot be freed until he becomes converted. But as long as he remains in this service of sin, he is under God's curse and wrath, Eph.2:3. God's wrath rests upon every sin-loving and sin-serving unconverted sinner. Such a person is exposed to eternal condemnation and unless he becomes converted in this life, he must finally be forever lost.

THESIS II

Conversion is the renewing
of the sinner's heart by faith.

The Scriptures use many expressions which have the same meaning as the word, conversion. Peter calls it begetting again, 1 Peter 1:3; the Saviour calls it to be born again, John 3:3; John calls it born of God, John 1:13; St. Paul calls it quickening, Eph.2:5; Peter in Acts 5:31, calls it giving repentance; Paul, writing to Titus,(3:5), calls it regeneration; and in Acts 11:21, it is called turning to God and also believing.

Thus also our Confessional Books speak of conversion under different terms. In the Formula of Concord (all quotations from the Confessional Books are from Jacob's translation), p.556, we read, "Before man is enlightened, renewed and led by the Holy Ghost. All these expressions are synonyms, they all mean the same thing; the renewing of a sinners heart by faith."

In Acts 11:21 we read, "And a great number believed, and turned unto God." Here coming to faith is called conversion. The conversion of these people was their believing.

Col.2:12,13, "Wherein also ye are risen with Him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath He quickened together with Him." This text speaks of conversion, of the turning again to God from our sinful, depraved condition, and expressly the apostle says that this was done through faith. Gal.3:26, "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." Here we see how they who were once under God's wrath are now children of the Lord - by faith.

This change, however, which makes God's enemies God's Children, this is not a process of long duration, but it is a matter of a moment. Of course, the operations which precede conversion may be of long duration. By these operations we mean the work of the Holy Spirit in convicting a person of sin. A sinner may be a long time under the conviction of sin, he may for days and weeks be on the brink of despair, he may spend days with the shuddering thought of being forever cast to eternal damnation - but only in that moment when faith in the Saviour enters the sinner's heart, only then is the sinner converted. Faith in the Saviour has converted him; it has renewed his heart and has made of him a new creature. The old sinful nature certainly still remains in such a converted person.

But since the time of conversion a new man also dwells within him and this new man wages constant war against the natural sinful flesh. If this struggle between the old and the new man is missing in a sinner's bosom, then such a sinner has not been converted as yet: and though he profess to have faith, his faith is imagination and deception, it is what our catechism calls, faith of the head and mouth. For true faith which converts a sinner, is something active, it is a power and proves its power over against our sinful lusts and inclinations. It gives to the sinner light and understanding in spiritual things, so that the sinner now clearly realizes that the only way to salvation is Jesus the Saviour. It draws the sinner's love away from the things and pleasures of this world to God and to divine things. It implants into the sinner's heart the earnest desire to avoid sin and to walk in the ways of the Lord. It gives the sinner strength to turn a deaf ear to the temptings of the world and to hearken only to the voice of the Saviour. It makes the sinner feel happy, when he denies himself many pleasures and comforts for the Saviour's sake. And it gives to the sinner the power to will those things which are in accordance with God's will and also the necessary power to do the same.

Such, then is the power of faith, of that active faith which converts a sinner, and he who possesses this faith is converted indeed. He has become converted by that faith which has proven itself a power to renew his naturally wicked and sin-loving heart.

THESIS III

Conversion is in all respects and in every part a work of God, and in this work, the person to be converted cannot in any way help or co-operate.

Our thesis says that man cannot in any way help towards or co-operate in his own conversion; that means, he cannot do anything to bring about his conversion, nor can he assist in the act itself. Scripture says, Eph.2:1,5, "And you hath He quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins. Even when we were dead in sins hath He quickened us." Col.2:13, " And you, being dead in your sins."

A person who is dead has no life, not a spark of life within him, and to speak of a possibility of the dead man giving himself life again, or of helping towards being brought back to life, all such talk would be absurd. Lazarus was dead, so truly dead that it was said of him, "He stinketh." And in that state he remained until the beginning of that moment when the Saviour gave him life, and in that same moment he became as truly alive as we are who are today assembled here. The texts quoted above tell us that man by nature is spiritually dead. They tell us that those who are now Christians were once spiritually dead. What absurdity then to say that one who is spiritually dead can give himself spiritual life, or can at least help in being brought back to spiritual life. There are people who would brand us as insane, if we would assert that a dead man can help towards coming back to life, and yet those same people think they shine in wisdom, when they set to work to show that a man spiritually dead can help towards being brought back to spiritual life. People of this class follow their own darkened reason, instead of being led alone by the unerring Word of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost, Who is a divine master of language, knew perfectly well what the word "dead" meant when He wrote in His Bible that man is by nature spiritually dead. And we may rest assured that if the Holy Ghost had wished to say that there is still a small remnant of spiritual life remaining in natural man, then He would not have used the word "dead."

The sainted Dr. G. Stockhardt writes as follows, "To speak more concretely of the moral state designated by the word dead, we would say that there is not one spark of true, saving knowledge of God to be found in natural man, not one spark of fear of God, not one spark of love to God, not one spark of true brotherly love, not one spark of trust in God, not the slightest contact with God, nothing but inability and repugnance to all that is good and godlike and pleasing to God, nothing but utter helplessness in spiritual things" (Epheserbrief, p.115).

Our Confession Books say, "Also the Scriptures teach that man in sins is not only weak and sick, but also entirely dead, Eph.2:1,5; Col.2:13. As now a man who is physically dead cannot, of his own power, prepare or adapt himself to obtain temporal life, so the man who is spiritually dead in sins cannot of his own strength, adapt or apply himself to the acquisition of spiritual and heavenly righteousness and life, unless he be delivered and quickened by the Son of God from the death of sin." Page 553,-11.

But whilst unconverted man cannot in any way help towards his conversion, there is one thing he can do, yes, there is one thing he cannot help but do, he resists the workings of God in his heart, and until the sinner is converted, he cannot for a moment leave off from this natural resistance; by his own power he cannot even overcome this natural resistance against the working of God in his soul.

Gal.5:17, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, and these (Greek: for these) are contrary one to the other." In the light of this text let us ask why the flesh, that is our depraved human nature, is against the Spirit of God? The answer given by the text is: Because they are the very opposites to one another, and draw us away into opposite directions. When the Spirit works for light, the flesh works for darkness; when the Spirit works for holiness, the flesh strives after sin; when the Spirit draws towards God, the flesh draws away from God. This resistance against the Spirit of God is the very nature of flesh, and as long as a sinner remains flesh only, that is as long as he is unconverted and has not as yet the new man living within him, so long also the sinner resists the Spirit. The Lord alone can break this natural resistance of a sinner against the Holy Spirit, and God does this when He converts the sinner, for He then creates spiritual life in the spiritually dead sinner.

Another text in which God clearly tells us that man cannot by his own power leave off resisting God is Rom.8:7, "The carnal mind (i.e., the mind of the unconverted sinner), is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." In accordance with such Word of God, our Lutheran Confessions speak as follows, "And in this respect it might well be said that man is not a stone or block. For a stone or block does not resist that which moves it, as a man as long as he is not converted resists God the Lord. And it is nevertheless true that a man, before his conversion, is still a rational creature, having an understanding and will, yet

not an understanding with respect to divine things or a will to will something good or salutary. Yet he can do nothing whatever for his conversion, and is in this respect much worse than a stone or block, for he resists the Word and Will of God, until God awakens him from the death of sin, enlightens and renews him" P.563-59.

However, if conversion is in no part the work of man, who is it that performs this work? Our thesis answers: Conversion is in all respects and in very part the work of God. Let us hear what the Scriptures say.

1 Cor.12:3, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost." Only a converted person can in faith call Jesus the Lord. This text, therefore, tells us that no man can come to such a converted state but by the Holy Ghost. Heb.12:2, "Looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith." Here Jesus is expressly called the Beginner of our faith. John 6:44, the Saviour says, "No man can come to Me (that is in faith) except the Father, which hath sent Me, draw him." Col.1:13, "Who (namely God) hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the Kingdom of His dear Son." God did not place darkness and light before us asking us to choose for ourselves, but He mightily laid hold on us when we lay in darkness, and placed us into the Kingdom of His Son. And this God did, when He gave us faith.

In Eph.2:5, conversion is called a bringing back to life (quicken) and distinctly this work is ascribed to God. The passage reads, "Even when we were dead in sins hath God quickened us together with Christ." When we were dead in sins, God made us spiritually alive. He did not give to us strength to come back to life of our own accord, nor did He merely point out to us the way to life, but when we were dead, He gave us life. From Eph.1:19,20, we learn that the same Almighty power which was required to bring Christ back to life was also required to raise us from spiritual death. 2 Cor.5:17, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." Eph.2:10, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works."

Also from these texts we learn that Almighty power is necessary to convert a sinner. For if a converted person is a new creature, and if the act of converting him is a new creation, then it is quite evident that conversion is in all respects and in every part the work of God, for nobody but God can create.

Luther says of conversion that it is a work so great as if God were creating heaven and earth anew.

Our Confession says, "God, in His counsel, before the ages of the world, decided and ordained that He Himself, by the power of His Holy Ghost, would produce and work in us, through the Word, everything that pertains to our conversion." P.657-44.

Here our adversaries raise the following objection: If man cannot come to faith by his own power, why then do we find passages in the Bible where man is commanded to believe? Such passages, for instance, are Mark 1:15, "Repent ye and believe in the gospel;" or Acts 16:31, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ;" or Isaiah 21:12, "Return, come." Why these commands if man cannot follow them? Luther, in his celebrated book, "On the Bondage of Man's Will", shows admirably that from the Scriptural command to do a certain thing there does not follow that man is able to act according to the command. Luther quotes the example: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thine heart." Does it follow from this command that man really can love God with all his heart? So also when man is commanded to return to God, or to believe in God, it does not follow that man in his own strength can do this. The Saviour who says, "Come unto Me," also says, "No man can come unto Me except the Father, which hath sent Me, draw him."

Such expressions, however, as "Come!" "Believe!" "Repent!" as found in the Bible, are by no means superfluous. In our next thesis we intend to show that God converts sinners through the power of His Word. And since expressions like "Repent!" "Return," are God's Word, they are to be reckoned amongst the Means which God uses in bringing about a sinner's conversion. For when God says to the sinner, "Repent!" or "Be converted!" He at the same time by means of those words is ever ready and willing to create spiritual life within the sinner. Of this we shall now deal in detail in our fourth thesis.

THESIS IV

The Means which God uses to effect a sinner's conversion are His Word and Holy Baptism.

God tells us repeatedly in the Bible that His Word is a power to convert and save souls.

Rom.1:16, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth." Ps.19:7, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul."

Jer.23:29, "Is not My Word like as a fire? saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?"

1 Cor.1:21, "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."

In these texts the Lord tells us that His Word is a power to convert sinners. And in James 1:18 we are told whence the Word has this great power. We there read, "Of His own will begat He us with the Word of Truth." God Himself works through the Word; He Himself is active in the Word, and hence it is God who gives such great power to the Word. Into the Word, which God addresses to sinners, He places the power which is necessary to bring a sinner back to spiritual life.

Apart from the Word, the Bible knows of no means to convert sinners. When Jesus, on the night of His betrayal, prayed for those who would in future believe, He expressly said that they would come to faith through the Word which His apostles and disciples would proclaim in the world. Jesus mentions His Word as the only means of giving people faith. John 17:20.

And in accordance with the Saviour's words, St. Paul writes, "Faith cometh by hearing." Rom.10:17.

Also from Luke 16:29-31 we learn that the Word is the only Means which God uses to convert sinners. Abraham here tells the rich man (traditionally called "Dives") that if his five brethren are not converted by the Law and the Prophets, i.e. by the Word, then there is nothing else that can lead them to repentance.

This power to convert souls is also especially mentioned in Scripture in connection with that Word of God which is connected with the water in Holy Baptism.

Titus 3:5, "Not by our works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Here we are told that Baptism also is a power to regenerate or convert sinners.

Our Confession says, "Yet God the Holy Ghost effects conversion not without means, but uses for this purpose the preaching and hearing of God's Word, as it is written Rom.1:16" (p.497-4).

Here a question arises. It is this: If God alone converts sinners by the power of His Word, is not His Word really more powerful then, when it actually does convert a sinner, than when sinners hear the Word and remain unconverted? No, we reply, that is by no means the case. God's Word is a power and the same power at all times. Christ says, John 6:63, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life." And in Rom.1:16 the apostle calls the Gospel a "power of God unto salvation." That is the very nature of the Gospel. A gospel which is not a power of God unto salvation is no longer a Gospel. And even when the Gospel is rejected and trodden under foot by those who hear it, it is, even in those very moments, a power of God to save souls.

In Acts 13:46 we are told that the apostle said to the Jews, "It was necessary that the Word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing you put it from you and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles." In v.48 we are told, "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the Word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." The Word which the Jews rejected converted the Gentiles, and the apostle expressly tells the Jews that even for them there is salvation in the Word which they wilfully reject.

God's Word, therefore, is not to be blamed, when sinners who hear it do not become converted, but the fault lies with the sinners themselves, who like the Jews, have wilfully hardened their heart against the Gospel. And experience shows that the longer a sinner hears God's Word without coming to conversion, the harder and more secure does his heart become, and the less hope there is ever to convert such a sinner. Many careless sinners think that it is only a light matter, if they do not yield to God's Word at once. They comfort themselves with the self-given promise that later on they will yield fully to the Word. The probability, however, is that such a person will never be converted, but will die in unbelief. For to bring to repentance a person who has repeatedly heard God's Word with a secretly sin-serving heart, that is infinitely harder than to lead a godless adulterer to repentance. Therefore also the Saviour said to the Pharisees in His time, "The publicans and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you" (Matt.21:31).

And to us the Saviour says, "Take heed, therefore, how you hear" (Luke 8:18).

The doctrine of conversion which we have considered in the light of God's Word, is one of the cardinal doctrines of Scripture, and in whatever church this doctrine is taught, preached and confessed, in all its purity, that church is unmistakably pointing sinners to their crucified Lord and Saviour. All honour and glory to God, our Lutheran Church by God's grace still proclaims this doctrine of conversion in strict accordance with Scripture. May God grant that it continue to do so to the end.

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