

Free Will and Conversion

(Man's Cooperation With God: Not In, But After Conversion)

By Lyle W. Lange

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Introduction

The chief doctrine of the Christian religion is the teaching that man is saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Man is justified before God, not by his own works, but by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith in Jesus Christ. God is the Author and Finisher of our salvation from A - Z, from beginning to end. God the Father in love sent God the Son into this world to redeem us; God the Son, Jesus Christ, redeemed all men by His holy sinless life and His substitutionary suffering and death; God the Holy Spirit brings men to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior from sin through the means of grace, and through these means of grace He sustains and nourishes faith to the end. Scripture teaches us that if a man is saved, God is the One Who gets all the credit; if a man is damned, it is because he in unbelief rejected the salvation won for him by Jesus Christ.

But, why go into a discussion of the teaching on Justification in connection with a paper that is to deal with the free will and conversion of man? The answer is, they are related. False teaching with regard to one doctrine of Scripture will have its effect on the other teachings of Scripture. False views with regard to man's part in conversion lead to an injection of work-righteousness into the chief doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine by which the Church either stands or falls, the doctrine of Justification. When the Germans wanted to take the famed Maginot line in World War II, they simply aimed their guns at the foundation of this fortress, and it collapsed. When Satan wants to subvert a church, he also aims his guns at the foundation of the Church - Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Every false teaching introduced into a church will have an effect on the central teaching of Scripture - the article of Justification. Every false teaching introduces another crack into the foundation, until the super-structure collapses because the foundation is too weak. In a similar way, Satan destroys churches by channeling his attacks on Jesus Christ through false doctrines that will affect the article of Justification.

Someone once remarked that doctrinal drifting is similar to standing on a gravel pile. You slip so slowly and imperceptibly that you do not realize how far you have gone until you have reached the bottom. We must be on our guard, so that we do not begin slipping bit by bit without noticing what is happening. This could happen if we are not careful to follow St. John's advice: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world." I John 4:1.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher remarks: "There is no new thing under the sun. Is there a thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It hath been long ago, in the ages which were before us." Ecc. 1:9b-10 ASV. This could be applied to false doctrine. A careful study of church history will reveal that for century after century Satan had been serving up the same heretical pottage at the ecclesiastical table. The only change has been that different ecclesiastical butlers have been serving up Satan's mess of heresy on different denominational trays. In short, it is the same mess of garbage, just wrapped up in the Glad bags of today instead of the newspaper of years ago.

One of Satan's heretical dishes that he has been serving to men of all ages is that man can in some way, be it ever so small, make a contribution to his conversion, and hence, to his salvation. F. Bente, in his introduction to the Book of Concord, draws attention to the close relationship that exists between the doctrines of justification and conversion in his discussion of the doctrinal error of George Major and that of the Synergists. Both of these arose in the period after Luther's death in 1546 and before the drafting of the Formula of Concord in 1577. George Major defended a doctrine presented by Melancthon which stated that man's salvation depends on his conduct after his conversion (the phrase in controversy was: good works are necessary

to salvation). Synergism teaches that man's salvation depends on his conduct in conversion. Conversion and salvation, then, would depend in part on man's actions. The burden of both Majorism and Synergism would be a denial of the Scriptural principle of "grace alone". Both, consistently carried out, destroy the central Christian truth of justification by grace alone. Both derive their source, not from Scripture, but from anti-Scriptural and fallacious reasoning. Of the two false doctrines, the more dangerous is Synergism, which reduces man's cooperation to a seemingly harmless minimum.

Basically, we may speak of three views of conversion which the Church has met with. Only one view is Scriptural. The other two views are unscriptural and harmful, for they attack the doctrine of justification. One false view is that man, either in part or entirely, is responsible for his conversion. Thus, salvation would depend, not on grace alone, but also, on man and his efforts. This view may be further divided into three groups: Pelagianism, which teaches that man himself effects conversion; semi-Pelagianism, which teaches that man makes the beginning in conversion, and God completes the work; and synergism, which teaches that God makes the beginning of conversion and man carries on after that. Another false view on conversion is that which was held by Calvin, the French Protestant theologian, who made Geneva, Switzerland, his headquarters during the Reformation. He spoke of determinism, that man is either elected for heaven and thus saved by irresistible grace, or elected for damnation. The third view is that which our Lutheran confessions call divine monergism, the teaching of Scripture. Scripture teaches that God alone effects conversion; that man is purely passive and the object of conversion, and that man does not accomplish, but undergoes conversion.

In what form is Satan's heretical pottage being served up at the ecclesiastical table today? Two of the most common forms in which we today meet false doctrine with regard to conversion come to us under the headings, "a prayer to receive Christ", and, "a decision for Christ." The following is a prayer taken from the back of a *Chick Publications* tract: "Dear Father, I know that I am a sinner and need forgiveness. I believe that Christ died for my sin. I am willing to turn from sin. I now invite Jesus Christ to come into my heart and life as my personal Savior. I am willing, by God's grace, to follow and obey Christ as the Lord of my life." Is this Scriptural? Hardly! This type of prayer puts the cart in front of the horse. Faith is made into a work whereby man of his own natural powers takes possession of the salvation which Christ won.

Other examples could be cited, and will be later in this paper. Suffice it for now to say that we meet with this view of conversion in many prominent religious groups today, such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Explo 72 and Key 73 teams, and Billy Graham's Hour of Decision. The relation of conversion to justification has already been demonstrated. It is important, then, that we review what Scripture says about man's free will and conversion, so that we might fortify ourselves against the assaults of the devil. We shall divide our essay into three parts: First of all, we shall examine what Scripture says about man's free will since the Fall; secondly, we shall note that Scripture teaches that God alone can effect faith; finally, we shall note that man can cooperate with God after conversion.

I

The status of man's free will may be divided into four categories: 1.) Before the Fall; 2.) Since the Fall; 3.) After conversion; and 4.) After the resurrection of the body. Before Adam and Eve fell into sin, they had the ability to obey God or disobey Him. Adam and Eve, before the Fall, had a free will in temporal and spiritual matters. Man was created in the image of God, righteous and holy. Adam and Eve, however, disobeyed God by transgressing His commandment. The results of their sin were immediately noticeable. Instead of being holy, man was ensnared by sin. Instead of being righteous, man walked contrary to God's will. Instead of loving God, man feared Him and hated Him, looking upon Him as his enemy. With regard to man's will in heaven, the Scriptures teach that in heaven the believer's will will be restored to perfect harmony with God's will again. The image of God will be fully restored. It will be impossible for the believer to sin in heaven, neither will he want to.

The chief controversy does not center around man's will before the Fall or after the resurrection of the body, but with regard to man's free will after the Fall, before, during, and after conversion. In order to ascertain

the truth about these matters, we must go to the source of truth - God's Word. The Wisdom of this sinful world is only foolishness in the sight of God. Articles of faith must be judged by God's Word alone.

In the first place, we must acknowledge that man's reason or natural intellect still has a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God. David writes: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." Ps. 14:1. Paul states: "That which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes. His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." Rom. 1:19-20 NASB. Man also has a blurred understanding of the Moral Law of God since the Fall. Paul writes: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the Law, do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending themselves." Rom. 2:14-15 NASB. That man's conscience is a fallible guide is shown us by Paul's statement: I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, You shall not covet." Rom. 7:7b NASB.

Yet, in spite of a natural knowledge of God and a conscience, man's natural intellect is so blind, ignorant, and perverted, that when even the most educated and brilliant men on earth read or hear the Gospel, they cannot from their own powers believe it or understand it. The more a man applies his natural reason to the Gospel, the more it becomes foolishness to him. The Scriptures teach that since the Fall, man is born spiritually blind, born in the image of sinful Adam, not in the image of God. Paul writes: "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." I Cor. 2:14 NASB. Natural man has the opinion that, if something is wrong with his relationship with God, he will go to God and straighten things out. It is absurd, to his way of thinking, that God should have to take care of the matter. Natural man cannot fathom the fact that his sin stands as a barrier between him and God. As one "natural" man, who proudly proclaimed himself to be a realist, told me with a smirk on his face: "It's just too good to be true that God would die for man." His wife rather loudly seconded his opinion by saying: "All my life I've believed that if I do the best I can, I'll get to heaven. Now you come and tell me I'm a sinner and need a Savior. I'm horrified!"

In I Cor. 1, Paul makes a special point of it that the unregenerate man considers the Gospel foolishness. He tells us Christ crucified is "to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness," I Cor. 1:23. Man by nature cannot comprehend the way of salvation, which is through the Way - Jesus Christ. Paul, in Eph. 4:17-18, describes the natural state of the unregenerate Gentiles, which is the natural state of all men. He writes: "This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart." NASB. That spiritual blindness is a universal condition of all men Paul emphasizes in Romans, where he quotes Ps. 14 in speaking about man's natural spiritual state: "There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God." Rom. 3:10-11 NASB. Scripture tells us that with regard to spiritual matters, natural man is in the dark. In his defense before King Agrippa, related in Acts 26, Paul states that Jesus sent him "to open their (the Gentiles) eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God." Acts 26:18a NASB. To the Ephesians Paul wrote: "For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." Eph. 5:8 NASB.

Not only is natural man since the Fall spiritually blind, he is also spiritually dead. When a baby is born, he may be physically alive, but he is spiritually dead. Christian parents rejoice when God gives them a child. They rejoice doubly when God gives that child spiritual life through the Sacrament of Baptism. I know a devout Christian lady who always placed flowers on the altar of the church on the anniversary of her Baptism. Her spiritual birthday meant more to her than her physical birthday. Man is in need of a spiritual birth, for he is born spiritually dead. Scripture teaches that natural man is not just weak or sick in spiritual matters, but defunct and entirely dead.

The Scriptures tell us in many places that natural man is spiritually dead. Paul describes the Ephesians as "being dead in your trespasses and sins." Eph. 2:1, 5. Paul writes the same thing to the Colossians. Col. 2:13. In

II Cor. 3:5 Paul writes: “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.” NASB. Jesus states: “Without Me, ye can do nothing.” John 15:5. The Formula of Concord sums up this teaching of Scripture by stating: “Just as a man who is physically dead cannot of his own strength prepare or adapt himself to obtain temporal life again, 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 is delivered and quickened by the Son of God from the death of sin. Therefore the Scriptures deny to the intellect, heart, and will of the natural man all aptness, skill, capacity, and ability to think, to understand, to be able to do, to begin, to will, to undertake, to act, to work or to concur in working anything good and right in spiritual things as of himself.”¹ As little as a corpse can say to the undertaker, “I’m going to make myself alive again,” so it is also impossible for natural man to say to the Lord Jesus, “Come into my heart, for I want you to rule there.”

The Bible teaches that not only is natural man incapable of doing anything towards his own conversion and salvation, but he also is an active enemy of God. Not only is the natural man turned entirely away from God, but he also is turned against God and toward every evil. Natural man is hostile to God by his disposition and nature, so that he actively pursues what is displeasing to God and contrary to His will. The Lord Himself commented on the natural will of man when He said: “The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” Gen. 8:22. Jeremiah writes: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt: Who can know it?” Jer. 17:9 ASV. Commenting on this same truth, Paul states: “The mind set on the flesh (the carnal mind) is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so. Rom. 8:7 NASB.

Since the Fall, man has no free will in spiritual matters. It is true that an unconverted man may apply himself to civic righteousness, but he is incapable of and not disposed to applying himself to the righteousness of Christ. Man is totally corrupt since the Fall. Scripture often speaks of man’s total depravity since the Fall. David writes: “They are all gone aside; they are together become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” Ps. 14:3 ASV. Again, he writes: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Ps. 51:5. This spiritual condition which all men share by birth is called “original sin.” The Augsburg Confession describes original sin this way: “Since the fall of Adam, all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence.”² Something which should not be in man is there; and something which should be in man is not there. Fear and trust in God, righteousness, holiness, which should be in man, are absent by nature. Concupiscence, that is, a bent or lust for evil, which should not be in man, is there. Man since the Fall is incapable of and not disposed by his own natural powers to converting himself, cooperating with God, or contributing to his own salvation.

It is important to be clear on what Scripture teaches of man’s free will since the Fall. If a person is not clear on this doctrine, the doctrine of conversion will be affected, as will the doctrine of justification. In the beginning of this essay we noted some unscriptural teachings concerning conversion. Let us look at them for a minute, for a careful inspection of what people teach with regard to man’s free will since the Fall will reveal to us why they teach as they do with regard to conversion.

In order to answer the question of why some are saved and others not, we must go to Scripture. Man’s reason is incapable of fathoming the unsearchable depths of God’s wisdom. When man tries to give an answer to this question based on his own reason, he will wind up making statements contrary to the Word of God. On the one side there is the view of Calvin, who did teach that man is totally depraved. Yet, he felt that if God chose certain individuals to be saved, He must have elected the rest to damnation. Thus, he taught that the elect were converted by irresistible grace, and those elected to damnation were not seriously sought after by the Holy Spirit. This view is false and is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.

At the other extreme you have the opinions of those who find the cause of conversion in man. The most extreme view was that of Pelagius, a British monk of the fourth century, who taught that man’s nature every

¹ Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, p. 885, Art. II, par. 1-2, Triglotta

² Augsburg Confession, Art. II, p. 43. Triglotta.

after the Fall is incorrupt. Thus, in essence, he denied the necessity of redemption. A modified form of the teaching of Pelagius, called semi-Pelagianism, came from the teachings of John Cassian, the Abbot of Massila in southern France. He lived in the fifth century. His teachings were a reaction to the teachings of Pelagius. Cassian taught that original sin is only a blemish on man's nature, similar to a spot on an apple. While the spot may affect the looks of the apple, the apple remains essentially good. Man, according to Cassian, was to have retained essentially good spiritual powers with which he could work out his salvation with the help of God. Semi-Pelagianism became the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

More insidious is the teaching of Synergism. F. Bente calls Melancthon the father of Synergism. Synergism teaches that original sin is only an external impediment to the good spiritual powers. Thus, the Synergist would subscribe to the statement that there is a little bit of good in the worst of us.

Where would the "decision for Christ" people stand? Most would stand with semi-Pelagianism or Synergism. When someone attributes to man the power to invite Christ into his heart, he is ascribing to unregenerate man a power he does not have. Consider these statements taken from the popular Campus Crusade For Christ booklet, "Four spiritual Laws". Law Four states: "We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives. We must receive Christ (John 1:12). We receive Christ through faith. (Eph. 2:8-9)" Does this sound similar to Scripture? Just wait! Let us see what they mean by "receiving Christ" and "faith". They state: "Receiving Christ involves turning to God from self, trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive us our sins, and to make us what He wants us to be." The prayer they suggest for receiving Christ is the following: "Lord Jesus, I need you. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank you for forgiving my sins. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be." Thus, they attribute to man the ability or power to open the door of his heart to God. They do speak of man as being characterized by active rebellion or passive indifference, but they do not teach, as Scripture does, that man has no free will in spiritual matters since the Fall.

What do they mean by faith? Don't they teach that we receive Christ through faith? We must ask what their definition of faith is. They state: "The moment that you, as an act of faith, received Christ, many things happened, including the following: 1. Christ came into your life. 2. Your sins were forgiven. 3. You became a child of God. 4. You began the great adventure for which God created you." Faith is termed an act, namely, a work that man does. Besides teaching a conditional Gospel, this approach also ascribes to unconverted man a work he is incapable of and not disposed to do. This foregoing example again emphasizes the need for published confessions. People may use the same words or terms, but may mean something completely different. Think of the fact that the Roman Catholic, the Seventh Day Adventist, the Pentecostal, and even the Jehovah's Witness will tell you they are saved by faith; yet, none of them describe faith as Scripture describes it. All use the same word, but have their own meaning.

We are grateful for the message of the Gospel which the Rev. Billy Graham preaches. Yet, we must take exception to his teaching on conversion. I have heard him say on a television broadcast: "You have the power to decide for Christ." No man has that power. Natural man can not cooperate with God before or in conversion. Man must be converted. Let us see what Scripture teaches with regard to man's conversion.

II

The Formula of Concord states: "The Holy Scriptures ascribe conversion, faith in Christ, regeneration, renewal, and all that belongs to their efficacious beginning and completion, not to the human powers of the natural free will, neither entirely, nor half, nor in any, even the least or most inconsiderable part, but entirely, solely, to the divine working and the Holy Ghost."³ This is a beautiful summation of Scriptural truth. Man is converted, not saved by his own actions. Scripture talks of man as being the object of conversion. Conversion is something done to man. Paul writes to the Philippians: "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not

³ Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, p. 891, Art. II, par. 1, Triglotta.

only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.” Phil. 1:29 NASB. Jesus stated to the materialistic mob that wanted to make Him a bread-king: “No one can come to Me, unless the Father Who sent Me draws him.” John 6:44 NASB. Of Peter’s confession of faith Jesus said: “Blessed are you, Simon Barjonas, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father Who is in heaven.” Matt. 16:17 NASB.

Only the Holy Spirit can give faith. In I Cor. 12:3 Paul writes: “Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed, and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost.” The congregation at Corinth had overemphasized the importance of certain spiritual gifts. Paul states that whoever believes in Christ has the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit-faith in Christ. No man is able to believe in Jesus unless it is through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Man is born spiritually blind. God the Holy Spirit alone can give spiritual sight by enlightening sinful man. Paul writes: “Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.” For to us God revealed them through the Spirit.” I Cor. 2:9-10 NASB.

Natural man is spiritually dead at birth. He needs to be born again. Only the Holy Spirit can effect this new birth. Jesus said to Nicodemus: “I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.” John 3:5 NASB. Natural man must be born again. The Spiritual Corpse must be given spiritual life; it must be quickened. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. Paul states: “But God... even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.” Eph. 2:5 NASB. Man is born an enemy of God. He must be converted, turned around, made a lover of God. To His politically-kingdom-minded disciples Jesus said: “Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matt. 18:3 NASB. The Holy Spirit converts, enlightens, makes spiritually alive, and gives spiritual life to man. Man is unable by his own natural powers to help the Holy Spirit in even the slightest way.

It should be pointed out that conversion is not a long, drawn out process, a matter of stages. A man is either a believer or an unbeliever. There is no intermediate state. Man is either converted or unconverted. He either possesses through faith the forgiveness Christ won for him, or, he loses the benefit of the forgiveness Christ won for him by unbelief. Jesus said to Nicodemus: “He who believes in Him (the Son) is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.” John 3:18 NASB.

The Holy Spirit alone converts. How does He do this? Scripture teaches us that the Holy Spirit converts through means, the means of grace. The Holy Spirit does His work through the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. It is true that the Gospel demands faith. Jesus declared: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. He that believeth not shall be damned.” Mark 16:16. Yet, only the Holy Spirit through the Gospel can supply what God demands, namely, faith. Thus, when Jesus says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock, if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.” (Rev. 3:20 NASB), we must remember that only the Holy Spirit through the Gospel can open the door of man’s heart to Christ. He converts, and He does this through the Gospel.

The Gospel saves. Paul states: “For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.” I Cor. 1:21 NASB. The message of the Gospel saves. As Paul wrote to the Romans: “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” Rom. 10:17. Philip’s paraphrase of this passage makes the point clearer: “Belief, you see, can only come from hearing the message, and the message is the Word of Christ.” Faith comes by hearing the Gospel. The message of Christ crucified is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” Rom. 1:16 NASB. Through the message of the Gospel the Holy Spirit gives the gift of faith which the message demands.

Faith is not a work of man. It is not an act performed by his own natural powers, as the “decision for Christ” people indicate. Faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit, as salvation in its entirety is “a gift of God.” Rom. 6:23b. Faith is created in man’s heart through the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes: “By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” Eph. 2:8-9. It is noteworthy that “decision for Christ” people will quote this passage and then turn around and describe faith as an act or work of man’s natural powers. The Apostle Paul disposed of this idea when he wrote

to the Galatians: “This is the only thing I want to find out from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith?” Gal. 3:2 NASB. The word “hearing” in the Greek can refer either to the thing you hear or simply to hearing. This is important here. As one person put it: “The heard message of faith gives not only the message of Christ, it gives the hearing of faith to receive the message. The ‘message of faith’ Is ‘the message which brings faith’.”⁴

Through the Gospel in Word and Sacraments God the Holy Spirit effects conversion. Our confessions reecho this truth when they state: “So also when Luther says that with respect to his conversion man is purely passive, that is, does nothing whatever towards it, but only suffers what God works in him, his meaning is not that conversion takes place without the preaching and hearing of God’s Word; nor is this his meaning that in conversion no new emotion whatever is awakened in us by the Holy Ghost and no spiritual operation begun; but he means that man of himself, or from his natural powers, cannot do anything or help towards his conversion, and that conversion is not only in part, but altogether an operation, gift, and present, and work of the Holy Ghost alone, who accomplishes and effects it by His power and might, through the Word, in the intellect, will, and heart of man.”⁵

The Formula of Concord makes a point of it that our Lutheran Confessions throughout teach this. Who can forget the beautiful way Martin Luther put this truth in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified, and kept me in the true faith; in like manner as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

III

Finally, it must be pointed out that man after his conversion does cooperate with God in his sanctified life, but still haltingly because of his sinful flesh. The converted man is given a new outlook on life and the Life by the Holy Spirit. Paul states: “For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.” Rom. 7:22 NASB. This is impossible for the unconverted man who is an enemy of God. To him, God’s commandments are a burden. Unregenerate man feels that the only way to have any fun is to indulge in sin. For him, to take away sin is to take away fun. God and His commandments are made out to be the enemies of fun by the unregenerate. He does not realize that the results of sin are never any fun. The regenerate man, however, keeps the commandments of God out of love for Him Who loves us and gave Himself for us. For the regenerate man, the commandments of God are a delight to carry out. As David wrote: “Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power.” Psalm 110:4. Psalm 1 says of the believer: “His delight is in the law of the Lord.” Psalm 1:2.

Nevertheless, the believer’s sinful flesh continues to resist the will of God, as Paul states: “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.” Rom. 7:21-23 NASB. This battle between new man and old Adam goes on throughout our life. It will not be over until the day we die. This is why we will be concerned about strengthening the new man through the means God has given us. God the Holy Spirit alone can sustain our faith to the end. We will want to stay under His gracious influence lest sin take the upper hand in our life and root out our faith.

Conclusion: Today we meet with assaults on the foundation of our faith also through people who ascribe to man the power, be it ever so small, to take by his own natural powers the gift of eternal life. Let us remember that Scripture teaches that man since the Fall cannot cooperate with God before or in conversion, but only after conversion. God the Holy Spirit converts, quickens, and enlightens men through the Gospel.

⁴ Frederick Dale Brunner, “A Theology of The Holy Spirit.” Eerdmans, 1970. p 245.

⁵ Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, p. 915, par. 8-9, Triglotta.

But, now that we have reviewed the truth of Scripture, what are we going to do with it? Shall we go home and like the self-righteous Pharisee pray thus with ourselves: “I thank Thee that I am not as other men are: Pelagianists, semi-Pelagianists, Synergists, or even as those Campus Crusade for Christ People. I know the truth. I am completely orthodox.”? Shall we go home and become, to borrow an expression, “nattering nabobs of negativism”, anti-everything and for nothing? Shall we go home and sit on our orthodoxy while others continue to bring in the sheaves? God forbid! Let us remember that by the grace of God we have the truth. It is a shame that sometimes we must be moved to action by the efforts of those who do not have the whole truth or any of the truth.

We are for Jesus Christ. We are for His Gospel. Certainly, Jesus has given us the command to preach the Gospel. Yet, we are regenerate Christians, and this command is a privilege and a joy for us to carry out. The Holy Spirit converts through the Gospel, and our desire is to tell others about the wonderful things God has done for us. God has called us out of darkness into the marvelous light of the Gospel. This is something that is too good to keep to ourselves. We have an inner compulsion to share the Gospel with others.

As we conclude, then, let us remember what a privilege and joy is ours as converted Christians to share the Gospel which converts with others. This is work fit for angels, but is given by God to sinful men who have been enlightened by the Holy Ghost. Our fond desire is to share the Gospel with others. As we conclude, then, let us dedicate ourselves to sharing the Gospel with others, and say with the hymn writer:

And then for work to do for Thee,
Which shall so sweet a service be
That angels well might envy me,
Christ crucified, I come.
(TLH:390:4)