

*Essays*  
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*Conversion*

*Process*  
*or Crisis?*

Philippians 2:13

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# Conversion - Process or Crisis?

**Essay presented by Rev. A. M. Schupmann to  
the Pastoral Conference, August 21, 1953.**

Motto: "*For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*" Philippians 2:13.

Before we discuss the question expressed in the title of our study, it will be helpful to define the words used in that title. With Dr. A. L. Graebner we may define Conversion as follows:

"Conversion in the stricter sense of the term is the work of God by which man is, through the Gospel, transferred from a state of sin and wrath and spiritual death, in which all men by nature are, into a state of spiritual life and faith and grace in which alone the sinner can enjoy the benefits of Christ's redemption." — "Regeneration or Conversion in the stricter sense, being essentially the procreation of true and saving faith, is an instantaneous act or process, but is in adults preceded by preparatory operations, whereby the sinner is convicted of his sinful state and helpless condition under divine wrath by means of the Law and led to a logical or historical understanding of the contents of the Gospel, and which, with the outward use of the means of grace, in a measure, lie within the power and reach of irregenerate man." — "Inasmuch as regeneration or conversion is essentially the bestowal of faith, it is wholly and exclusively a work of God, wherein the person being regenerated or converted can in no wise concur, but is merely the passive subject, in which as in a rational being the salutary internal change is wrought by the grace and power of God through the means of grace." (*Doctrinal Theology*, sections 143-145.)

Dr. G. Stoeckhardt says the following in defining Conversion: "One would hardly be able to set up a clearer and stricter definition of Conversion than the one given in our Confes-

sions: ‘God the Lord draws the man whom he wishes to convert, and draws him in such a way that his darkened understanding is turned into an enlightened one and his perverse will into an obedient one.’” (*Lehre u. Wehre*.1907, p. 146; *Triglot*, p. 905, *F.C., Th.D.*, section 60.)

Our title poses the question; Is Conversion a process or a crisis? The terms “process” and “crisis” also require definition before we use them in our study. From the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Synonyms* we may take the following descriptions to assist us in limiting the meanings of the terms. “Process is ... when progress from a definite beginning to a definite end is implied and something is thereby made or produced or is changed from one thing into another: the term usually suggests the division of the entire series into steps or stages.” “Crisis applies to any juncture or pass the outcome of which has or will have a decisive effect and which, therefore, serves as a turning point in a life or a history, or, in medical use, of a disease. The term usually connotes suspense.” For the purpose of our discussion we shall emphasize from these descriptions that the word “process” involves steps or stages, while the word “crisis” refers to a single step or turning point. Although a time element enters into our question, too, we shall not place much emphasis on that.

What is Conversion? How does a person come to be converted? In the case of infants, conversion takes place in the Sacrament of Baptism, through which faith, which apprehends the merits of Christ, is created. In the case of teachable children and adults, conversion is, in the words of Dr. A. L. Graebner, “preceded by preparatory operations” which by the grace and power of God eventuate in faith.

We may give a word picture of what is done and what happens in the case of a person whom we hope, through teaching and preaching, to lead to faith in Christ. “*By the Law is the knowledge of sin*”; hence, first the Law must be preached to that person. From the Law he learns to realize the enormity of his sin and its terrible

consequences. Seeing that he is under the condemnation of the Law, he becomes terrified at the prospect that lies before him, namely, eternal damnation at the hands of a just and holy God. From the Law he knows that he can never keep that Law to God's satisfaction. He sees nothing but the chasm of fire and destruction before him. In his terror he asks: "*What must I do to be saved?*"

The answer to this question comes from the Gospel. The Gospel is preached to him. It tells him of the objective reconciliation of God and man through the atoning work of Jesus, that Jesus has already paid the debt of the world's sin, and that God has already in Christ declared all men free from the guilt of sin. The Holy Spirit, active through the Gospel, invites the terrified sinner to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and tells him that through such faith he will be saved.

As God wills, the Holy Spirit draws the terrified sinner through the Gospel, the "power of God unto salvation," into accepting Christ as his personal Savior; He places into his heart and mouth the "Yes" by which he accepts the invitation to believe in Christ and to trust in Him for the forgiveness of the sins that lie heavy upon him. When the Holy Spirit has created faith in his heart, the sinner is converted. He has passed from death to life. His blindness has been changed to sight. His enmity against God has changed to love and gratitude to God for His goodness and favor in Christ, the Savior.

Everything which we have just described, up to the moment in which faith is created in the sinner's heart, belongs to the *actus praeparatorii*, or the preparation for conversion. These "acts" do not constitute a process. Throughout this period of preparation, during which the Law and the Gospel are preached to man, he does not by successive stages or steps draw nearer to God or gradually come closer to conversion. The preaching of the Gospel does not become gradually more attractive to him but remains a "*stumbling block*" and "*foolishness*" (I Cor. 1:23; 2:14); nor does it appeal to his understanding, for Scripture says: "Neither can he

know them” (I Cor. 2:14). As for the preaching of the Law during this time of preparation, it also cannot draw man closer to God by degrees but rather has the opposite effect. It does not start and move man on a so-called “upward trend” but rather drives him away from God (Cf. Dr. F. Pieper: *Christian Dogmatics*, II, 458). It does not bestow some new powers by which man is able to decide for grace, to conduct himself gradually more properly and in time make the decision to refrain from willful resistance and to let God convert him. Rom. 9:6 denies man any powers generated by himself or by the Law: “*It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.*” Instead of gradually sending man on an incline upward to a stage in which he plays his role in a so-called process of conversion, the Law tends to increase man’s hostility, makes him hate God more, makes him “exceedingly mad” against the Christians and the Gospel, as happened in the case of St. Paul (Acts 26:9ff.; Pieper: *ibidem*).

The preparation for conversion is a downward trend, continuing downward until the divinely appointed pin-point of crisis is created and resolved by the power of God in the Gospel. Just as God created the world out of nothing, so he creates faith in man’s utterly rebellious, blind, dead heart. The crisis is a creation of faith out of nothing, a resurrection from the dead. At the point of crisis a man is converted, turned, reborn.

And we must consider a man converted, according to the Scriptures, as soon as the Holy Ghost, in the critical moment chosen by Him, kindles in man a spark of faith or awakens in him the faintest desire for the grace of God in Christ (cf. Pieper: *op.cit.*, II, 461). Our Lutheran Confessions speak the same way. The *Formula of Concord* calls those persons “godly Christians” who feel and experience in their hearts a small spark or longing for divine grace and eternal salvation,” and in whom “a spark of faith is kindled, which accepts the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake and comforts itself with the promise of the Gospel” (according to Pieper: *p. cit.*, II, p. 462 from *Triglot*, p, 885, *F.C, Th.D.*, II, 141; p. 903, *ibidem*, II, 54).

Those who make of conversion a longer or shorter process in the interest of synergistic teaching disagree with sound Lutheran Biblical teaching which **calls a person converted as soon as a spark of faith is kindled in him or he longs only faintly for the grace of God**. They delay the moment of actual conversion to a later time. Evidently they do not recognize the longing for grace as faith. Yet, such a longing in the heart is faith, for it is a yearning in the direction of Christ, not away from Him, Until a man is converted he is an enemy of God; he fights Him; he runs away from the sight of a holy and just God; he can think only that God is angry with him; he regards God as a stern Judge whose sentence of death he wants to escape. Those are the attitudes of his heart and mind, and they are all unspiritual, or spiritually negative. Like a blind man, he cannot see the grace of God; like a dead man he cannot “take and use” (Emch’s phrase) the grace that is offered to him. But as soon as a man has a longing for grace, that is a new attitude in his heart. It shows that he no longer fights like an enemy against God but has been changed and is moving toward God, so to speak, instead of away from Him. His enmity is gone and his mind is no longer the carnal mind. His blindness is gone and he sees the grace of God which was hidden before. He is no longer spiritually dead, for he is reaching out his hand for the blessings of God’s grace. His thoughts and desires are now spiritually positive and are beamed, so to speak, in God’s direction.

Such a changed person we consider to be converted in the strict sense of the word, and we treat him like a “godly Christian” in the pastoral care which we give him. We cannot, of course, see such a longing in the heart of another, and it is possible that he himself may not be conscious of its first stirrings in his heart; but as soon as he recognizes it, he can consider himself a converted person; and as soon as he gives expression to that longing in words to us, we must recognize him as a converted Christian and also tell him so for his comfort and assurance. He has passed the turning point, or the crisis, and is now a Christian.

Those who make of conversion a shorter or longer process will treat such a person in a different manner, for they do not yet recognize him as truly converted. People who merely long for grace,

as Dr. Pieper writes (*op. cit.*, II, p. 461f.),

“are warned against confidently trusting in God’s grace; they are told that their knowledge of sin and their experience of God’s grace is not yet deep enough, that their faith is still deficient as to quality and quantity, that the struggle of the spirit against the flesh is not strong enough, that the conscious self-determination for grace is still lacking, that, though they perform individual acts of faith, they have not yet formed the habitus of faith, etc.”

(From Walther’s *Law and Gospel* you will remember the experience which he had along these lines, pp. 141ff.)

Those who give such warnings as Dr. Pieper describes refuse to recognise the first faint longings for grace as the crisis or turning point which orthodox, Confessional Lutherans rightly regard as conversion. They place the moment of conversion farther ahead in time.

What accounts for this delayed conversion? Why do some delay recognizing someone as converted? One reason may be this, that they have an erroneous definition of faith. Sound Lutheran theologians have carefully distinguished between “direct faith” (*fides directa*) and “reflex faith” (*fides reflexa*). Dr. Pieper writes as follows concerning these terms:

“The *fides directa* designates that act of faith (*fides actualis*) by which the Christian directly lays hold of the divine promises of grace set forth in the Gospel, desiring and seizing it. The *fides reflexa*, reflex faith, is found in those who by reflecting on the effects and fruits of faith are conscious of the existence of their faith. In all cases believers accept the promises of the Gospel with *fides directa*.” (*op. cit.*, II, p. 444.)

Those who postpone the moment of conversion beyond the point at which we recognize the crisis of conversion pass by the *fides directa* and speak of faith as *reflexa*. They will not call it faith until they see and hear the external “signs and testimonies” of the



inner faith. They must hear a man's oral confession of faith first, preferably a declaration in a public service, especially a revival or evangelistic service in which prospects are led through appeals to their emotions to rise, testify, and declare themselves. Or they will not recognize a conversion until the prospect has shown that he is living a life of victory over sin (only too often consisting of the most noticeable victories, those over the gross sins of drunkenness, profanity, whoredom, etc.). Or they demand a period of testing in which to watch for backsliding. Or, as in the process-theory found among so-called Lutherans, they must make room for man's response to the Word and his cooperation with God in conversion. Such practices reveal that faith is viewed as reflex faith and that conversion is regarded as a process of steps and stages.

Another reason for the delay in recognizing someone as converted is synergistic teaching. This reason is related to the previous one, for synergists usually speak of faith as the conscious acceptance of the grace of God.

“This expression,” that is, the conscious acceptance of grace, “while often due to loose thinking, is as a rule used in the synergistic sense, meaning that conversion is brought about by the ‘self-determination,’ ‘self-decision,’ ‘right conduct’ of man, or that man can convert himself ‘if only he is willing,’ ” says Dr. Pieper (*ibidem*, note 76).

Here usually the process of conversion, involving steps or stages, is advocated, always in the interest of adding the cooperation of man to the grace of God.

How does this synergistic process work out? Basically the pattern is the same; in different theologians, however, variations of language occur, (it is not expected that errorists agree among themselves except in some basic points; for, after a division has been created by error, the errorists quite naturally do not think it necessary that they “*all speak the same thing*,” I Cor. 1:10.) In general, the process-theory of conversion has a long history in the Lutheran Church, reaching back into the seventeenth century. Mis-

sourians have fought the error especially as advocated in the old Iowa and Ohio synods. Dr. Stoeckhardt's article in *Lehre und Wehre* in 1907 was directed against those synods, and Dr. P. E. Kretzmann's essay some twenty years later was a defense of the Scriptural position of the Old Missouri Synod against the errors of those same synods. Quite naturally we Old Missourians, now in the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, where we may speak out against error without hierarchical interference and official reprisals, think and speak first of the process-theory still advocated in those same synods, which are now a part of the American Lutheran Church.

We may briefly describe the usual process as taught in the American Lutheran Church in the following manner. God works upon the sinner through the Law. The sinner becomes "conscious of God's terrible wrath over sin and this consciousness strikes him down (terrors of a stricken conscience), crushes his heart, and temporarily brings to a halt his natural resistance, i.e., it makes him entirely passive (*Formula of Concord*, Art. II, p. 54) " (M. Reu: *Christian Ethics*, p. 131; quoted in Dr. Theo. Dierks: *An Examination of the Proposed Doctrinal Affirmation*, n.d., p. 32.) The grace of God is offered to him to enable him to cease all resistance to the work of divine grace. The power to cease resistance is offered through God's Word. "This power man must receive and use" (Dr. Emch, *Lutheran Standard*, Oct. 27, 1951), namely, to refrain from willful resistance when the Gospel is offered to him for his conversion. Then "in the very moment - because Scripture knows of no state of religious neutrality - when man through the Law has been made entirely passive, the Gospel points him to Christ ...." (M. Reu: *ibidem*, in Dierks: *ibidem*.)

"If ... man refuses to heed the voice of the Gospel that would create faith, the momentary condition of 'mere passivity' ceases, of course. ... His natural resistance has now assumed the form of willful opposition (*mutwilliges Widerstreben*); the hour of grace has been idled away, and his guilt has been heavily increased." (M. Reu: *Lutheran Dogmatics*, 1941-42 ed., II, p.136; 1928 ed.; p. 265.)

If he does not resist willfully but lets God's work be done on himself, then he is converted (as Dr. G. Fritschel of Iowa said in 1872; cf. Wicke: *Catechism of Differences*, pp. 21f.).

Since we stated that we would emphasize the steps or stages in the alleged process, we shall do so. First, through the Law God brings to halt man's natural resistance. Secondly, God offers him grace to refrain from adding willful resistance when the Gospel comes to create faith in him. Thirdly, man must receive this power of grace and use it to keep his willful resistance down. Fourthly, God converts the unresisting man. It is difficult to get a clear and consistent picture of this process because there are variations in the descriptions found in past and present writers of what now is the A.L.C. The refraining from willful resistance is placed in different stages of the process by different writers. Dr. Emch in 1944 spoke of it in the stage of hearing the Law (*Lutheran Standard*, July 22, 1944, p. 8f.; in Dierks: *op. cit.*, p. 33), while Dr. Reu speaks of it in the Gospel stage (as above). It is also not clear through what means the grace of God comes which man resist or does not resist. Dr. Emch's idea suggests that the Law is regarded as a means of grace; in fact, that is the point which Dr. Dierks brings out when he quotes Dr. Emch from the year 1944.

We have made four steps out of the process. If we look at the persons who are active in the process, we may denote the stages as follows: 1) God comes through the Law or the Gospel or both to halt man's natural resistance and to give him grace to refrain from willful resistance; 2) man takes the power of the Spirit offered by grace and uses it to refrain from willful resistance; 3) God converts man. These three steps involve God, man, and God again. The reason for the development of such a process is to be found in the second stage and is the second actor, namely, man - unconverted, blind, dead, hostile, rebellious man. The object is to let man cooperate in his conversion.

Since the alleged part that man has in this process is nowhere described In Scripture, it is rather difficult to picture in one's mind

what might pass through the thoughts of a man who is confronted with the grace of God and. must decide whether or not to use it in order to refrain from willful resistance. Dr. Stoeckhardt constructed a word-picture of the thoughts of such a man, and hearing his description will be both interesting and instructive (*Lehre u. Wehre*, 1907, p. 152). His description, translated from the German, is as follows:

“I hear God’s Word. I know God’s Word to some extent. I know that the chief content of the Word is Christ, the crucified Christ. It is certainly a real piece of folly and foolishness that a crucified one is passed off as the salvation of the world. Nevertheless, inasmuch as there could be some truth in that which the Christians from the beginning have said and confessed concerning this Christ, namely, that there is salvation in no one else, I shall at least not bar the way for the Holy Ghost, who is now calling me to Christ. Christ, the cross of Christ, and the grace of Christ are repugnant to my inmost soul. My whole Ego opposes the idea that I should be saved like a poor malefactor by grace alone, without any merit of my own. (Natural resistance.) But since this perhaps after all is the only way for one to be saved, I shall at least hold still for the Holy Ghost, so that He might be able to take the thorn, the opposition, out of my heart and win my heart for Christ. (Refraining from willful resistance.) What I hear every Sunday in the sermon, about repentance and conversion, that I must give up all my hitherto existing inclinations and habits, that is not agreeable to my sense and taste. I do not want that. To be frank, I do not want to be converted, (Natural resistance.) Yet I do not want to hinder God if He wants to convert me. (Refraining from willful resistance.) If I am asked: Don’t you want to become a Christian? Don’t you want to become a different person?, then - if I want to be honorable - I must definitely answer No (Natural resistance.) But if God inquires of me whether He may not make a Christian of me, reform me, and make me upright and pious, and pleads with me, I sense now that pleading and knocking of the Holy Ghost and so I will not say No! to that. (Refraining from willful resistance.) In

short, God, heaven, and salvation do not really matter much to me at all. Nevertheless, I shall be satisfied with what God makes out of me and consent to what God does in me.”

So far Dr. Stoeckhardt’s picture. He then adds:

“As for a man who, with his natural resistance unbroken, refrains from willful resistance over against the grace that works upon him, you may portray him as you wish, that will always get a picture similar to the one just described.”

The sainted Doctor here speaks of “unbroken” natural resistance,, and Dr. Reu above spoke of bringing the natural resistance to a halt so that man is entirely passive; through the years other A.L.C writers have modified their theory here and there; but the picture just given is still a serviceable portrayal of the process which allegedly takes place before conversion, at the end of which process a man is first considered converted.

## II.

What judgment must be passed on this process-theory? Dr. Stoeckhardt writes (i.e., p.153):

“The theory of the refraining from willful resistance before conversion, as indeed the very distinction between willful and natural resistance, the whole alleged process before conversion is a figmentum humanum.”

He speaks of it as confused and absurd. Then on the basis of Scripture passages which treat of conversion he shows that it is contrary to the Scriptures to bring into the teaching of conversion a process which assigns to unconverted man spiritual feelings and acts, better conduct, better impulses and motions in the heart, an ability to take and use grace that is extended to him, etc. Here acknowledging our grateful dependence upon Dr. Stoeckhardt’s detailed and profound analysis, while we actually quote him only in part, we shall note one of the Scripture passages which he uses to condemn the process.

The Scriptures describe conversion as an awakening from spiritual death. Ephesians 2:1ff. tells us: “*And you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins ... But God ... even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ ... and hath raised us up together ...*” Here the Apostle says that the heathen of Ephesus were once dead in sins and that God made them alive with Christ and raised them up just as God had done in his own case. By nature man is spiritually dead and therefore is completely unable to perform any spiritual act in that condition. How can he, then, exhibit any better conduct over against the power of the Gospel and refrain from willful resistance so that he may be said to let himself be converted? Where does he get the power to “let God’s work be done” on himself (G. Fritschel in 1872, as given above), or the power to “allow himself to be corrected” (R.C.H. Lenski: *Eisenach O.T. Selections*, p. 249; quoted in Wicke: *op. cit.*, p. 21; apparently written by Dr. Lenski at least after 1927, the year of the publication of the *Concordia Cyclopedia*, which does not mention this volume under his name), or the ability to “yield himself unto God” (Prof. A. Jagnow in *What Lutherans Are Thinking*, p. 82 - published in 1947; quoted in Wicke: *op. cit.*, p. 22), or the power to “allow the Holy Spirit to work in his heart” (W. A. Poovey: *Questions That Trouble Christians*, p. 92f.; quoted in Wicke: *op. cit.*, p. 27), or the power to “receive and use” the Spirit-given “power to cease all resistance to the work of divine grace” (Dr. Wm. Emch in Lutheran Standard, Oct. 27, 1951)? These five representative expressions covering nearly seventy years all assign to man the power and ability to do something spiritual before he is converted from his spiritual death. What is the source of that power?

It has been claimed most persistently that this power comes from God. Dr. Stoeckhardt answers:

“If they say that the power for such conduct comes from God, it is still always the natural man, dead in sins, who properly uses the powers conferred by God. And it is a contradiction in itself if one ascribes the use of powers to a dead person. The use and application of powers presupposes life.” (*op. cit.*, p. 196.)

**To ascribe to natural man the ability to take and use spiritual powers while he is still dead is contrary to common sense, is an absurdity, and completely removes what Scripture says about spiritual death and the awakening from death.**

Nor is it reasonable for synergists to describe this longer or shorter period between the bestowal of new powers and their use by unconverted man as a kind of neutral state or twilight period during which man's conversion hangs in the balance. To do so would amount to saying that the subject to be converted is in a state of being half-dead and half-alive. We make such a statement, not because synergists readily use these terms or admit their use (recall that Dr. Reu said above that there is "no state of religious neutrality"), but because their theory involves them in that absurdity. They say that a man who takes and uses such powers is not yet converted; hence, they cannot say that he is yet out of the state of spiritual death; and yet they ascribe to him the use of powers which can be used only by one who is quickened and converted. Such a person is dead, and not dead - alive and not yet alive - half-dead and half-alive. That is an absurdity in the realm of nature as well as of the spirit. A person is either alive or dead. A person in a deep coma is still alive, not half-alive. To say that at the raising of Lazarus Jesus communicated some power which Lazarus had to take and use in order to refrain from resisting the Lord's quickening power but that Lazarus was not alive until the Lord acted again and called him forth would involve the same absurdity.

Instead of inventing a kind of process which runs into synergism as well as into nonsense, the inventors would do better to abide by clear Scripture and see in conversion a simple point of turning from death to life, a punctiliar crisis in which man does nothing at all but only suffers in a passive way the work which God does on him. It is true that Dr. Reu tries to escape being charged with teaching a process of some duration by saying that his theory involves only a moment (cf. above, p. 8), but his "moment" is still a kind of momentary time plateau in which man is allowed time to respond to the new powers offered to him and which he must take and use. (NOTE: It is due to Reu's reduction of the time element

to a moment that we said earlier (p. 2) that not much emphasis would be placed on the time element but that we would rather emphasize the steps or stages in which now God, now man, has a part to play. We shall touch upon the time- element again below.) Whether Dr. Reu or another theorist speaks of a moment or a year, he is not speaking of a crisis but a process, and one that makes room for the cooperation of natural man in his conversion. We should not be deceived by words and phrases used by errorists.

It is the way of the errorist to use as much orthodox language as possible. But in his mouth the correct terms gain a new meaning. They become a shield to hide his error. They have the orthodox sound but not the orthodox sense. Thus it is in the case of the synergistic process of conversion. We must be careful to note the manner in which they use language which, on the surface, seems correct.

We have already called attention to the word “moment” as used by Dr. Reu. In his process-theory Dr. Reu also uses the expression “entirely passive” and again “mere passivity” (of, above, p. 8). He points to the fact that those expressions are based on the *Formula of Concord*, which uses the expression pure passive concerning man’s will in conversion (Art. II, *Epitome, Negativa*, section 9, *Triglot*, p. 791). The expression is orthodox and Confessional but Reu’s theory gives it a new meaning. Dr. Dierks (*op. cit.*, p. 33, note 4) declares that Iowans and Ohioans depart from the Confessional meaning of that term and use it to give the “meaning of a certain condition in which man must be found if he is to be converted. ... he must keep still and not add to his natural resistance a willful resistance, otherwise the Holy Ghost cannot convert him through the Gospel. Thus man’s ‘mere passivity’ becomes an active performance, a positive cooperation with the Holy Ghost.” Synergists have no right to use that orthodox expression.

The expression “prevenient grace” also has a respectable reputation in the tradition of orthodox theologians. It is, however, misused by the advocates of the synergistic process. To them it is the



grace by which a person is enabled to refrain from willful resistance. When the error behind their use of the term is pointed out to them, they inform everyone that Quenstedt, who surely is regarded highly by the orthodox teachers, used the term. And so he does use the term, as Dr. Pieper points out (*Zur Einigung*, 1913, P. 44), but he uses the term correctly and connects no false doctrine with it. Those who advocate the synergistic process claim that through powers ‘bestowed by this prevenient grace man is able to conduct himself properly toward God’s converting grace, To use the expression In that sense is wrong.

By the way, the history of the use of certain theological terms through the years is interesting and instructive. The opponents of Missouri in the controversy on Election and Conversion were often attacked for use and misuse of certain terms. They usually tried then to find some orthodox theologian of the past, recognized by Missouri as orthodox, who had used the expression. So they hoped to justify their doctrine, often citing the Lutheran “Father” without troubling themselves to note the exact use which he made of the term. Because of controversies some of these terms have fallen into disuse - some because they sound suspicious and too easily lend themselves to abuse, others because they are inherently dangerous and false. An example of the former class is the term “*prevenient grace*”. Chemnitz used it in his *Loci*, and Quenstedt borrowed it from him (cf. Pieper: *op. cit.*, p. 45, note 71). Both theologians used it without taint of error. I do not know its history since Quenstedt’s time, but since its abuse in Iowa and Ohio circles it has, I believe, not been used in orthodox Missouri writings. An example of the latter class is *intuitu fidei*, around which much controversy arose in the Election Controversy of the 1880’s and subsequent decades. The early Lutheran theologians who used the term meant well, and Dr. Walther, as well as Dr. Pieper, defended the use they made of it. Dr. Walther suggested getting rid of the term not tolerating it any longer, because the “new synergists” were hiding their false teaching behind it. (Quoted in Pieper: *op. cit.*, p. 52.) Dr. Pieper said it was a dangerous and false expression which could not be justified by Scripture or the Confessions, that no theologian ever clarified

anything with it but only dulled his sword, and that the expression must be rejected (*op. cit.*, p. 59.) Dr. Walther also, of course, saw that the term was, in itself, *in abstracto*, un-Scriptural. (cf. Pieper: *op. cit.*, p. 56.) There are probably certain expressions which we ourselves may avoid today because they have become suspicious to us through the controversies over the so-called *Common Confession*, a theological (?) document which was reportedly written for amateur theologians in the pews but was rather written by amateur theologians in pulpits and professors' chairs.

In a different manner also the word process in the title of our paper can lead to counter-charges. We say that the American Lutheran synergists are to be condemned for making conversion a process. Now, they can reply that Missouri writers have used the term themselves. It would not take them long to discover that Dr. A. L. Graebner, in his *Doctrinal Theology* (Sect. 144) said that conversion is "an instantaneous act or process." They would point out that he said that of conversion in the stricter sense, too. Thus they would try to cancel our charges. (NOTE: Dr. Graebner uses the term again in describing conversion in the wider sense, where its use is in no way objectionable. I note that the *Concordia Cyclopaedia*, s.v. "Conversion," quotes Dr. A. L. Graebner verbatim concerning conversion in the wider sense and thus retains the word process for that; but in defining conversion in the stricter sense it seems to condense Sections 143 and 145 from Dr. Graebner's book and wisely deletes the word process, calling conversion simply "an instantaneous act." This omission was deliberate, no doubt, being dictated by the disrepute into which the term had fallen after Dr. Graebner's death in 1904. Since Dr. P. E. Kretzmann had the oversight of the doctrinal articles in the *Cyclopaedia*, the improvement is doubtless to be credited to him.) I do not know whether any Ohio or Iowa synergist ever called conversion a process or not, but the false teaching of those synods has been condemned as a process in Missouri circles at least since the appearance of Dr. G. Stoeckhardt's article in 1907. Dr. Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* seems to reserve the word process for the theory of the synergists, whom we have been referring to in this study, and the same seems to be true of his *Zur Einigung*. The

term is usually used against the process-theory as implying something gradual, of some duration, for which reason, no doubt, Dr. Pieper uses it in a section entitled “Conversion Is Instantaneous”, at the end of which he adds, in a note, that synergists will “not accept instantaneous conversion.” (*Christian Dogmatics*, II, p. 464.) Their process obviously requires some time. In this study also we are condemning the synergistic theories as processes and we are insisting that conversion is rather a crisis, a critical turning point, not an arc-turn but an instantaneous about-face, like running to first base and back home again instead of around the diamond, or like a basketball bouncing back the moment it strikes the floor and like a baseball when it is hit by a bat.

Terms are sometimes troublesome things, but speaking about the terms we have mentioned, about the terms in our topic, is helpful. We want to speak clearly and accurately especially where the truth of the Word and the salvation of souls is at stake. We want to be faithful to the Scriptural advice that in doctrine we show “*sound speech that cannot be condemned*” (Titus 2:7f.) and that we “*hold fast the form of sound words,*” as St. Paul reminded Timothy (II, 1:13). If we were not careful in our use of words and did not avoid those that are suspicious or liable to misunderstanding, we would not be good Lutherans. It is well known how careful the writers of the Lutheran Confessions were in their use of terms, in explaining the proper sense of terms, and in pointing out expressions which ought to “be avoided “because they were smoke-screens for errors. *The Preface to the Christian Book of Concord* shows a necessary concern for the correct use of “phrases and forms of expression” (*Triglot*, p. 19) and a determination “not to depart even a finger’s breadth either from the subjects themselves, or from the phrases’ contained in previous confessions (*Triglot*, p. 23). The *Formula of Concord* is very careful about terms and contains many warnings against terms that ought to be avoided because they do not conform to “*the form of sound words*” in doctrine. (See the *F.C., Epitome*, II, *Negativa*, section 8, [*Triglot*, p. 789; IV, *Affirmativa*, section 4; *Sol. Decl.*, p. 857 (16); p. 913 (86); p. 947 (29); p. 949 (36)

### III.

Although we want to learn in this study again the thing which our faithful teachers impressed upon us long ago, that we should be cautious about suspicious terms and accurate in the use of words, the chief purpose of our study is to point out some of the doctrinal aberrations in the process-theory, chiefly its synergism and the shameful, destructive denial of the precious *sola gratia*. We shall list a few of these errors as briefly as possible. (The ancient Roman poet Horace said: "I labor to "be brief and become obscure." I trust that will not happen here.) The brevity will leave many questions unanswered, of course, and will exclude the mention of other errors that may come to your mind. If this paper suggests further study, it is profitable, in spite of its shortcomings.

1) The basic error involved in the process-theory is that it is synergistic and so destroys the *sola gratia*. The proponents of the theory have heard this charge often and have gone on record as saying that conversion is due solely to the grace of God even in their theory. We point out that they assign some work to man, namely, his refraining from willful resistance. They reply that this part assigned to man is performed through powers bestowed by grace, etc. We ask whether that man is already converted, since he is allegedly performing the un-natural, spiritual work of responding to the grace of God. They say that he is not converted yet, but that God can now make the next move and convert him, bring him to faith. We reply that, if the man is not converted, he must still be dead spiritually, blind, and hostile to God. How can a dead person "receive and use" (Emch's phrase) the preferred grace? Then we tell them plainly that they are assigning to man a definite cooperation with God before conversion, and that such teaching is synergism. They will not admit that their process is synergism; but it is synergistic - it is un-Lutheran, contradictory, illogical, confused, absurd, and un-Scriptural.

These synergists may talk about "new powers of grace" and say that their refraining from willful resistance is really doing "nothing," but, as Dr. Pieper writes (*Christian Dogmatics*, II, 483), "when synergism comes into the open, it declares that,

‘rightly understood, everything depends on this ‘nothing.’” Then in a footnote (*ibidem*) Dr. Pieper quotes the Ohio *Kirchenzeitung* of 1893, Page 314, to show that a synergist who came out into the open actually said that “on the conduct of man ... everything depends; on this his conversion and salvation hinges.”

2)The synergistic process amounts to a conversion before a conversion. It makes an illusion out of that act of God which we commonly regard as conversion, as Dr. Stoeckhardt writes (*L.u.w.*, 1907, p. 196). Orthodox Lutherans have always pointed out to the synergists that, if it is true that man does the work of keeping himself neutral and refraining from willful resistance, such a man is already converted. This they do not admit, thus making of conversion at this point an illusion.

3) Synergists imagine a process that “begins “before conversion, includes the cooperation of man, and leads up to conversion, or terminates in conversion. Just as the synergists place conversion late in order to give man a part in his conversion, so they place their process early in order to let man contribute his work in conversion. There is a process that includes the cooperation of man in spiritual work, “but it begins with the crisis of conversion and ends at death, either the return of spiritual death through falling from grace or the end of physical life. The *Formula of Concord (Epitome, II, Negativa, Section 9 Triglot, p. 791)* says:

“For when the Holy Spirit has wrought and accomplished this (conversion), and man’s will has “been changed and renewed by His divine power and working alone, then the new will of man is an instrument and organ of God the Holy Ghost, so that he not only accepts grace, but also co-operates with the Holy Ghost in the works which follow.”

The *Thorough Declaration* later (*Triglot, p 907*) explains how this cooperation after conversion should be understood and how the term can be misunderstood and misused. Dr. Stoeckhardt also speaks of this process after conversion, calling it a *Prozess* (*L.u.w.*, 1907, p-149); what he condemns is the process before conversion as advocated by the synergists.

4) The synergistic process runs into the error of making the Law a means of grace. Dr. Theo. Dierks (in the booklet mentioned earlier, p. 32) calls attention to the “error, which has “been consistently taught within the American Lutheran Church, that the Law as a means of grace puts the sinner in the condition of ‘mere passivity,’ so that the Gospel can then bring him to faith.” No quotation is given there in which the Law is called a means of grace in so many words. But if ALC writers nowhere specifically make such a statement, it is still true that they make the Law a means of grace. How they expressed themselves on this point in recent years is shown by Dr. Dierks (*ibidem*) In 1938 the ALC accepted the *Brief Statement* with certain reservations. They did not feel “obligated in every case to employ the same terminology” as the Brief Statement (Dierks, *ibidem*). One of these cases of “terminology” concerned the question, what the means of grace are. The *Brief Statement* says that they are “the Word of the Gospel ... and the Sacraments.” The ALC preferred the statement that “the Word and the Sacraments are the means of grace” (so stated by Missouri’s committee in its report to the Synod in 1941; quoted in Dierks, *ibidem*). This is equivalent to saying that the Law must be a means of grace. This fault of the synergists is related to the following point.

5) The synergist’s mixing of the Law into the means of grace and his giving man a part in conversion shows also that his process is based on a mixing of Law and Gospel. Dr. F. Pieper writes (*Christian Dogmatics*, III, pp. 248f.):

“Because the synergists let the promise of grace apply only to those who in distinction from others cultivate the proper conduct (make the right choice, take the right attitude toward God’s grace, refrain from willful resistance, make the possible faith actual, etc.), they abolish the difference between the Law and the Gospel. ... The synergists falsify both the Law and the Gospel, since neither the Law nor the Gospel admits a difference in men in their relation to God. The Law condemns all without exception, and the Gospel assures all without exception.”

6) The synergist's process is rationalistic. It is a forbidden attempt to answer a question which Scripture does not answer to the satisfaction of human reason, namely, why some are saved in preference others. It is an attempt explore the hidden will of God.

Other doctrinal errors into which the synergistic process leads its inventors might have been mentioned; for example, the doctrine of Original Sin could be listed here, for that is perverted through the so-called process.

In conclusion, the advocates of the process-theory will, of course, not admit that all this and more is wrong with their theory. They will deny the charge of synergism. just as Prof. Emil Matzner of the ALC recently denied Dr. F Pieper's right to label the old Iowa and Ohio synods "synergists" when he reviewed the second volume of the latter's *Christian Dogmatics*. But we know that the charge is based on Scripture, just as we know that our own doctrinal position is the Scripturally correct one. We are sure, because the Holy Spirit has given us that confidence. And our humble thanks ascend to God's throne for keeping us true to His Holy Word. Without His gracious gifts we would all be constructing theories which take the glory from God and give it to sinful, rebellious, proud man. It is our prayer that God would keep His truth bright and clear in our hearts for our own sakes as well as for the sake of those entrusted now and those to "be entrusted in the future to our pastoral care. May He guide us as we contend for the faith once delivered unto the saints!

Albert M. Schupmann, Pastor  
Immanuel Orthodox Lutheran Church  
Winter Haven, Florida

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*Concordia Lutheran Conference Archives*  
17151 S. Central Ave.  
Oak Forest, IL. 60452

## *Conversion*

“Conversion in the stricter sense of the term is the *work of God* by which man is, through the Gospel, transferred from a state of sin and wrath and spiritual death, in which all men by nature are, into a state of spiritual life and faith and grace in which alone the sinner can enjoy the benefits of Christ’s redemption...”

“Conversion is essentially the bestowal of faith, it is *wholly and exclusively a work of God*, wherein the person being regenerated or converted can in no wise concur, but is merely the passive subject...”

“To ascribe to *natural man* the ability to take and use spiritual powers while he is *still dead* is contrary to common sense, is an absurdity, and completely removes what Scripture says about spiritual death and the awakening from death...”

“Those who make of conversion a longer or shorter process in the interest of synergistic teaching disagree with sound Lutheran Biblical teaching which calls a person converted as soon as a spark of faith is kindled in him or he longs only faintly for the grace of God....”