

God alone gets the Credit for Converting Sinners

The old saying goes, “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” We could paraphrase this old saying somewhat, and say, “Only God can make a saint out of a sinner, or a believer out of an unbeliever.” There are a number of reasons why this is true. In the first place, all people are by nature spiritually blind, dead, and the enemies of God. Left to ourselves, given an eternity, we never would come to God, love Him, or believe in Jesus as our Saviour.

The Formula of Concord states:

For, as Dr. Luther says, in comments on Psalm 90, “In temporal and external affairs, which concern nourishment and bodily needs, the human being is clever, intelligent, and up to a point industrious, but in spiritual and divine matters, which concern the soul’s salvation, the human being is like a pillar of salt, like Lot’s wife, indeed like a block of wood or a stone, like a lifeless statue, which needs neither eyes nor mouth, neither senses nor heart, inasmuch as this human being neither sees nor recognises the dreadful, fierce wrath of God against sin and death but instead abides in a sense of security willingly and knowingly and as a result runs into a thousand dangers and finally into eternal death and damnation.”

But before people are enlightened, converted, reborn, renewed, and drawn back to God by the Holy Spirit, they cannot in and of themselves, out of their own natural powers, begin, effect, or accomplish anything in spiritual matters for their own conversion or rebirth, any more than a stone or block of wood or piece of clay [Isa. 45:9; 64:8; Jer. 18:6; Rom. 9:19-24] can.

For although they can control their bodies and can listen to the gospel and think about it to a certain extent and even speak of it (as Pharisees and hypocrites do), they regard it as foolishness and cannot believe it. They behave in this case worse than a block of wood, for they are rebellious against God’s will and hostile to it, wherever the Holy Spirit does not exercise His powers in them and ignite and effect faith and other God-pleasing virtues and obedience in them. (FC SD 11:20, 21, 24)

Luther described people in conversion as merely passive.

By this he meant:

Human beings in and of themselves or on the basis of their own natural powers are not capable of anything and cannot help with their own conversion. He holds that conversion is not just in part, but totally and completely a product, gift, present, and activity of the Holy Spirit alone, who accomplishes and effects what is done through His own power and might, working through the Word in the mind, will, and heart of the

human being *tanquam in subjecto patiente* [as in a subject acted upon] (that is, because the human being does and effects nothing but only endures what is done). This happens not like a picture being etched in stone or a seal being pressed in wax; these things do not know or feel or will anything. (FC SD 11:89)

The Bible makes it clear that God alone is responsible for a sinner's conversion. Jesus said, "*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him,*" (John 6:44). Paul described our conversion in these words: "*For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves,*" (Col. 1:13). To the Philippians, Paul spoke of faith as "*granted to you*" (Phil. 1:29). To the Corinthians, he wrote, "*God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ,*" (2 Cor. 4:6). Just as God created light where there was none, so God creates faith where there was only unbelief. This teaching, that God alone is responsible for a sinner's conversion, we call divine monergism.

It is this teaching of Scripture that the confessions reflect when they say:

Holy Scripture ascribes conversion, faith in Christ, rebirth, renewal, and everything that belongs to the actual beginning and completion of these things, not to the human powers of the natural free will - neither totally, halfway, somewhat, nor in the slightest and smallest bit - but rather ascribes all this *in solidum* (that is, completely and totally) to divine activity and to the Holy Spirit alone. (FC SD II:25)