



## 6

### The Means of Conversion— The Gospel in Word and Sacraments

Creating faith is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. Human beings are purely passive in conversion.

However, God commissions *people* to proclaim the good news of forgiveness in Jesus and to administer the sacraments. Jesus commands, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15). He tells his followers, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20). Our Savior explained to his followers, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third



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day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46,47).

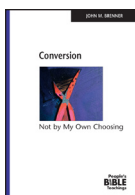
Why is the proclamation of the gospel necessary? What is the purpose of administering the sacraments?

***The Holy Spirit converts sinners through the means of grace***

In his infinite wisdom, God has determined to convert people through the means of grace, the gospel in God’s Word and the sacraments. He does not come to people directly. Instead, he uses sinful human beings like you and me to tell other sinners that Jesus lived and died to save them.

Paul makes that very clear in his letter to the Romans. He writes, “‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (10:13-15,17). Apart from the Word of Christ, no one will be saved.

God’s Word is the means through which the Holy Spirit converts us. Peter explains, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). The Augsburg Confession testifies to that truth: “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.”<sup>18</sup>



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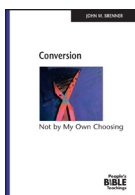
***The purpose of the law***

The two main teachings of the Bible are the law and the gospel. Both teachings are important for our salvation. Each teaching has a specific purpose and use.

How does the Holy Spirit use the law? He uses the law to expose sin. He uses it to crush sinners. He makes them aware of the penalty for sin and the horrible judgment that hangs over their heads. He uses the law to make them despair of any hope of saving themselves.

Paul explains this purpose of the law in his letter to the Romans: “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (3:19,20). The Holy Spirit has to make people conscious of their sin. He has to let them know that they are accountable to God for everything that they say and think and do.

People by nature know that certain things are wrong. They are born with a vague knowledge of God’s moral law. As the Bible reveals, “When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them” (2:14,15). Every society throughout history has had laws forbidding murder, stealing, and adultery, whether they have ever seen a Bible or not. Every human being has a conscience that accuses him when he does what he knows is wrong or fails to do what he knows he should.



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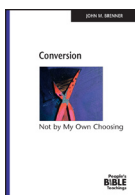
God's written law in the Bible, however, is necessary for people to understand the *depths* of their sinfulness. God's written law reveals the sin that lies in their thoughts and hearts and that permeates their very being. Paul explains, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet'" (7:7).

The Holy Spirit uses the law to reveal to sinners that they are under God's curse if they try to earn their own salvation by their own works. The apostle writes, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' Clearly no one is justified before God by the law" (Galatians 3:10,11). Unless the Holy Spirit convinces people that they cannot save themselves through their own actions, they will never understand their need for a Savior. Unless people recognize that by nature they are under God's curse, they will never appreciate the salvation that Jesus won by being made a curse in their place.

### ***The purpose of the gospel***

The purpose of the gospel is to comfort those who have been terrified by the law.

God commissions those who know the gospel to proclaim the gospel to others. He appoints sinners to proclaim his message of forgiveness. Those who proclaim the gospel are God's ambassadors. They speak God's message of reconciliation in God's place. They announce his amnesty to sinners who have rebelled against him. They proclaim peace between God and human beings. They declare that God no longer holds our sin against us because he held that sin against Jesus in our place. As Paul writes, "God



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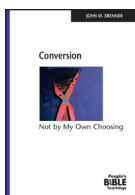


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was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:19-21).

The gospel message of the forgiveness of sins comforts sinners who have been crushed by the accusations of their consciences and the condemnation of the law. The prophet Isaiah writes, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for" (Isaiah 40:1,2). Isaiah proclaimed God's law in all its forcefulness. He announced to the people of Judah that their beloved city of Jerusalem was going to be destroyed. He told them that they were going to be taken into captivity because of their sins. But he did not stop there. He also had a message of comfort. The sins of the people of Judah had been paid for. How were their sins paid for? Isaiah declares, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (53:5).

The gospel speaks of the perfect life and sacrificial suffering and death of our Savior. It announces God's forgiveness to a world lost in sin by pointing sinners to Jesus, who has taken their sin away. When we speak to others about their Savior, we are like John the Baptist pointing to Jesus and saying, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). When we point to our Savior and his work of redemption and God's promise of forgiveness of



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sins, life and salvation, the Holy Spirit works through that message to bring people to faith.

Paul explains this truth in his second letter to the Thesalonians: “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2:13,14).

Martin Luther, in his Large Catechism, explains the importance of the proclamation of the gospel:

Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Baptism**

The Holy Spirit also works through Baptism to awaken or strengthen faith. As the Scriptures declare, “When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the *washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the



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hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7). Through Baptism we are born again and renewed by the Holy Spirit.

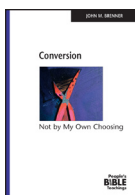
The water of Baptism not only symbolizes cleansing from the filth of our sins, it actually offers and conveys the forgiveness of sins. As Peter told his listeners on Pentecost, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Or as Ananias told Paul in Damascus, “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (22:16).

Since we receive God’s forgiveness through Baptism, we also receive salvation and a clean conscience toward God. If God has forgiven our sins, then we are saved from his wrath, and all of our guilt has been removed. The Bible declares, “Baptism . . . now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God” (1 Peter 3:21).

Baptism can accomplish all of this because it is not just plain water or an empty ceremony. Luther puts it this way in the Small Catechism: “Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water used by God’s command and connected with God’s Word. It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God’s Word which is in and with the water and faith which trusts this Word used with the water. For without God’s Word the water is just plain water and not Baptism. But with this Word it is Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of rebirth by the Holy Spirit” (The Sacrament of Holy Baptism: First, Third).

### ***The Lord’s Supper***

Does the Holy Spirit work through the Lord’s Supper (Holy Communion)? With Baptism we have direct words of Scripture connecting the work of the Holy Spirit to



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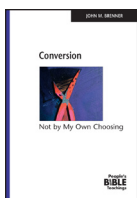


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that sacrament. We do not, however, find any passages in the Bible that say explicitly that the Holy Spirit works through the Lord's Supper.

From what the Bible says about God's Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, however, we do know that where God's Word is being used, there the Holy Spirit is present with his power. God's Word and promises are connected to the bread and the wine in Holy Communion. The words of institution remind us of the night Jesus instituted this sacrament. It was the night he was betrayed, the night before he was executed for our sins. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he spoke these words: "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me. . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19,20). He gave his followers his very body and blood, which would procure salvation. In the Lord's Supper he assures each communicant: This body was given and this blood was shed for you; you are forgiven. The Holy Spirit uses the promises contained in this sacrament to strengthen faith.

God has not intended the Lord's Supper for unbelievers, however. The Bible warns, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). Because of this warning, we invite to the Lord's Supper only those who know their sins, confess their Savior, and recognize that they are receiving his very body and blood in the sacrament. We do not want anyone to take the sacrament to his judgment.



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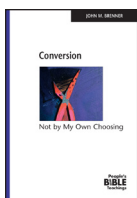


***Sufficiency of the means of grace***

Do we need anything besides the means of grace? Don't the proclamation of the law and gospel and the administration of the sacraments seem to be a little dull for our modern age? The last book of the Bible was written nearly two thousand years ago. Can anything the Bible says still cause citizens of our modern world to sit up and listen? Wouldn't people be more inclined to listen to us if we could perform miracles so that they could see God's power?

Our Savior once told a story of a man who did not think much of God's plan of salvation. He thought that he could improve on God's way of bringing people eternal life. We do not need to repeat all the details of the familiar account of the rich man and Lazarus. But the final verses are particularly worthy of note. In hell the rich man said to Abraham in heaven, "I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:27-31).

The rich man had not paid attention to God's plan of salvation while he was alive. When he died he went to hell, and the torments of hell were so fierce that he asked if Lazarus, who was now in heaven, could return from the dead to warn the rich man's brothers. Note Abraham's answer: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." They had the Old Testament. God's promises of salvation were being proclaimed in their midst. God's Word had everything they needed to avoid



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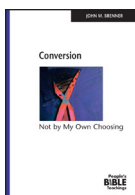
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hell. But the rich man didn't think that God's Word was good enough. If only someone would come back from the dead, he thought; if only his brothers would see such a miracle and speak to someone who had been on the other side of the grave—then they would listen. Please note Abraham's answer: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

The proclamation of God's law and gospel is all that we need to lead people to heaven. We cannot add anything to it to make it more appealing to people. We cannot do anything to make people more receptive to the message of the Scriptures. Even performing miracles will not help. God does not need our flowery rhetoric or our winning personality or our powers of persuasion. Paul recognized that truth. He wrote, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

### *Efficacy of the means of grace*

The rich man in Jesus' story didn't think that the Scriptures were sufficient to keep his brothers from hell because he doubted the power in the means of grace. He questioned the sufficiency of God's Word because he also doubted the efficacy of God's Word.



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Similar doubts enter the hearts of Christians too. Does the proclamation of God's law and gospel really do any good? Can the message of God's forgiveness which I speak to an unbeliever actually change that person's heart?

The clear statements of Scripture offer answers to those questions. Paul writes to the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (1:16). The Greek word translated as "power" is *dynamis*, from which we get our English word *dynamite*. The gospel is God's dynamite, his great power, for salvation. God's message of forgiveness has the power to change hard hearts. It can create spiritual life in those who are spiritually dead. It has the power to convince people of its truthfulness and lead them to trust in Jesus for salvation.

The gospel is effective because it is *God's Word*. The gospel is powerful because God's power is in it. God's Word can be trusted to work because the almighty God stands behind what he says. The gospel is God's power for salvation because the Holy Spirit works through the gospel to bring people to faith. As Paul instructs us, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

God promises that his Word will always accomplish what he wants it to accomplish. As he assures us through the pen of the prophet Isaiah, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (55:10,11).



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***The work of the Holy Spirit can be resisted***

If the power of almighty God himself is in the means of grace, why doesn't every person exposed to the means of grace come to faith? If God's Word is effective in accomplishing his purpose, why are there some who don't believe?

When God acts directly, as he did in creating the universe, there is nothing that can resist him. But when he works through means, he can be resisted. As Stephen, the first Christian martyr, accused the Jews in Jerusalem, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (Acts 7:51).

Our Savior lamented the stubborn resistance of the people of Jerusalem who refused to put their trust in him as their Savior in spite of his patient teaching and many miracles. He cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37).

Although no one has the power by nature to come to faith, sinners can resist the work of the Holy Spirit and reject God's gracious offer of salvation.

***Why are some saved and not others?***

Why are some saved while others are lost eternally? People have struggled with that question for ages. Sinful human minds will answer that question in one of two ways. They will either try to take some credit for being saved while others are lost, or they will try to blame God because some are lost forever. They will try to take credit by saying that they decided for Christ or weren't quite so sinful as others or cooperated with the work of the Holy Spirit.



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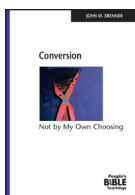


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Others blame God by saying that he decided in eternity who would go to heaven and who would go to hell.

How does the Bible answer the question? It doesn't answer the question in a way that satisfies our human logic. It tells us that every human being by nature is just as sinful and just as lost as the next. Paul writes, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22,23). "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (verses 10,11). If a person is saved, all the credit goes to God, not to that person. "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Whose fault is it if a person is lost? It is that person's own fault. Remember how our Savior lamented, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37). If a person is lost, he is receiving exactly what he deserves, for "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). While it is true that God has predestined those who will be saved, it is not true that he predestined the rest of humanity to hell. Paul assures us, "God our Savior . . . wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3,4). Peter explains, "The Lord . . . is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). The prophet Ezekiel reports, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11).

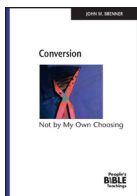


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Why are some saved and not others? We leave the answer to God and take him at his word when he declares that if a person is lost, that person is to blame, and if a person is saved, it is only by the grace of God. “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Romans 11:33).



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