

# **ILLINOIS LUTHERAN CONFERENCE**

## ***Topical Bulletin, December 2020***

It's not uncommon to hear various preachers on T.V. broadcasts or during large local outreach events inviting people to "make a decision for Christ" or to "say a certain prayer asking Jesus into their heart," and so forth. Such invitations and instructions assume that sinful human beings actually have the ability to choose for or against Christ. Hence, the important question which will be considered in this month's topical bulletin is: **Do human beings have free-will in regards to spiritual matters?**

*To be clear, in the foregoing question the term "free-will" is used in the sense of spiritual power by which an unregenerate sinful human being can desire that which is truly spiritually good, prepare himself or herself for divine grace, and by his or her own volition and true love for God accept and believe the Gospel, thereby converting himself or herself entirely— or at the very least positively cooperate and assist in his or her own conversion.*

Accordingly, the question – **"Do human beings have free-will in regards to spiritual matters?"** – will be answered correctly in the light of the Holy Bible, for, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." (2 Timothy 3:16-17 KJV)

**"And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5 KJV)**

**"And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done." (Genesis 8:21 KJV)**

**"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." (Romans 8:7 KJV)**

**"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14 KJV)**

*Comment: Observe in the foregoing Bible verses it is quite clear that a sinful human being by his or her own natural powers considers the things of the Spirit of God foolishness and cannot know them, and therefore cannot choose them but actually hates God and God's Law because man is by nature continually evil since the fall of our first parents. So, natural man is totally incapable of choosing Christ or willingly following God and His Law in thoughts, words, and deeds!*

**Jesus Christ clearly declares: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:44 KJV)**

*Comment: Note well that God the Father must draw folks to Christ or they CANNOT come to Him! Thus, sinful human beings cannot and do not make any decision for Christ, but rather flee from Christ because*

*they are found, "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart." (Ephesians 4:18 KJV)*

**"I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth."**  
(Jeremiah 31:18-19 KJV)

*Comment: Notice that the Lord God turns a sinful person before that person can truly repent and amend his or her ways. Thus, conversion in the strict sense of the term is a work of God by which a human being is transferred from a state of sin and wrath and spiritual death, into a state of spiritual life and faith and grace, for it is written: "you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For 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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:1-10 KJV)*

**Hence, in regards to man's "free-will" the Lutheran Confessions are in full accord with Holy Scripture, for the Formula of Concord, Epitome, II. Of the Free Will, declares:** "Concerning this subject, our doctrine, faith, and confession is, that in spiritual things the understanding and reason of man are altogether blind, and by their own powers understand nothing, as is written 1 Cor. 2, 14... Likewise we believe, teach, and confess that the unregenerate will of man is not only turned away from God, but also has become an enemy of God, so that it only has inclination and desire for that which is evil and contrary to God, as it is written Gen. 8, 21... Also Rom. 8,7... Yea, as little as a dead body can quicken itself to bodily earthly life, so little can man, who by sin is spiritually dead, raise himself to spiritual life."  
[Triglot pg. 787] {note that referenced Scripture verses are printed on the first page of this bulletin}

**Speaking of Jesus Christ, the Apostle John by inspiration of God states: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."** (John 1:1; John 1:10-14 KJV)

*Comment: Observe that those who become God's adopted sons, those who receive and believe on God's only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, do so by God's power and NOT by their own power, for they are born of God and NOT of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man. Thus, God does ALL the saving.*

**Jesus Christ says: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (John 14:6 KJV)**

*Comment: Jesus Christ is the only Savior, God-given-faith’s only object, the only Way to God and heaven, for, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12 KJV)*

**“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.” (1 Corinthians 12:3 KJV)**

*Comment: Note well that God the Holy Ghost empowers folks to confess that Jesus is the Lord. People CANNOT in sincerity confess Christ as Lord without the Holy Ghost empowering them to do so, for faith is NOT a product of man but is a gracious gift of God, as we saw earlier where we read from Ephesians chapter two: “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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”*

**“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:16-17 KJV)**

**“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (Romans 10:17 KJV)**

**“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” (1 Corinthians 1:18-21 KJV)**

*Comment: Faith in Jesus Christ is indeed a gracious gift of God, produced in man by the Holy Ghost working through God’s Word. Sinful human beings cannot and do not choose to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; rather, God calls folks to faith by means of the Gospel of Christ; and then, the very faith God has gifted folks with personally receives the forgiveness of sins and salvation Jesus has earned for the whole world. Yes, it’s all by God-given faith – from faith to faith – that a person receives the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to himself or herself.*

**Hence, in regards to man’s “free-will” the Lutheran Confessions are in full accord with Holy Scripture, for the Formula of Concord, Epitome, II. Of the Free Will, further declares : “God the Holy Ghost, however, does not effect conversion without means, but uses for this purpose the preaching and hearing of God’s Word, as it is written Rom. 1, 16... Also Rom. 10,17... [both printed above] And it is God’s will that His Word should be heard, and that man’s ears should not be closed. Ps. 95, 8. With this Word the Holy Ghost is present, and opens hearts, so that they, as Lydia in Acts 16, 14, are attentive to it, and are thus converted alone through the grace and power of the Holy Ghost, whose work alone the**

conversion of man is. For without His grace, and if He do not grant the increase, our willing and running, our planting, sowing, and watering, all are nothing, as Christ says John 15, 5: *Without Me ye can do nothing*. With these brief words He denies to the free will its powers, and ascribes everything to God's grace, in order that no one may boast before God. 1 Cor. 1, 29; 2 Cor. 12, 5; Jer. 9, 23." [Triglot pg. 787]

*The following Scripture verses are referenced in the above quotation from the Lutheran Confessions:*

"Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness."

(Psalm 95:8 KJV)

"And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul."

(Acts 16:14 KJV)

"That no flesh should glory in his presence." (1 Corinthians 1:29 KJV)

"Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities."

(2 Corinthians 12:5 KJV)

"Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches." (Jeremiah 9:23 KJV)

**The fact that man has absolutely NO free-will in spiritual matters is opposed by some professed Christians who misapply and misinterpret Holy Scripture. Answers to some common objections follow.** [Information in part has been gleaned from "Christians Dogmatics" by John T. Mueller, Th. D., Concordia Publishing House, 1934 edition]

Some say that natural man has a free will in spiritual matters based upon Romans 2:14, which says: "when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves." Answer: It is true that unregenerate man can keep the Law EXTERNALLY in a civilly righteous manner, but such is NOT keeping the Law INTERNALLY in a spiritually righteous God-pleasing manner, because Hebrews 11:6 clearly states: "without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Furthermore, we read in Romans 14:23 that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin." {See also the Bible verses quoted earlier in this bulletin.}

Some say that natural man has a free will in spiritual matters because otherwise his conversion would imply coercion on God's part. Answer: The conversion of a sinner is indeed a work of God's almighty power but is not an irresistible or coercive power since God has chosen to operate through means of grace which can be resisted, as is evident from the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:37, where we read, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" {See also the Bible verses quoted earlier in this bulletin.}

Some say that God only gives the power to believe but does not give faith itself, and consequently natural man must have a free will in spiritual matters. Answer: Philippians 2:13 clearly states, "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." {See also the Bible verses quoted earlier in this bulletin.}

Some say that natural man must have a free will in spiritual matters, for without man's cooperation in conversion man would not have his own faith but rather the Holy Ghost would believe for him. Answer: Bizarre and faulty is such logic when we recall that physical life is also a gift of God, and yet we ourselves do the living; it is not God who lives for us. Additionally, the Apostle Paul clearly confessed: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." (2 Timothy 1:12 KJV) And, the Ethiopian eunuch confessed to Philip, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." (Acts 8:37 KJV)

Some say that natural man must have a free will in spiritual matters since he can read the Bible, listen to God's Word being preached, exercise himself in civil righteousness, and so forth. Answer: External works alone are NOT evidence of spiritual life in the heart and true faith and true love to God, for hypocrites do as much as is evident in the lives of the Pharisees of old, to whom Jesus once said, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves." (Matthew 23:14-15 KJV) Additionally, in Luke 18:10-14 Jesus said in a parable, "Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

In conclusion, all arguments against God doing ALL THE SAVING stem from man's sinful flesh working in concert with the devil and the wicked world. Man's high self-esteem and sinful pride must be put aside by God's grace and mercy when He comes to us in His Word and Sacrament, "For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:3-7 KJV) Thank and praise the LORD for His grace and mercy!

m.e.l.