



Conversion: To See Decisions Dead People Make, Visit the Cemetery

By T. R. Halvorson

My Dad liked Billy Graham. When Graham's crusades were televised, Dad watched. Graham had a gift of oratory. He preached God's Law. He preached sin and salvation. He preached the person and work of Christ. But his sermons were spoiled by a serious error, the call to make a decision for Christ.

This was a central idea of Graham's message. He called his magazine *Decision Magazine*. His called his radio program *Hour of Decision*.

This idea is jarringly inconsistent with Graham's own preaching of fallen man's condition before regeneration. He would quote Paul in Ephesians and Colossians about unregenerate sinners being dead in trespasses and sins. (Ephesians 2:1, 4; and Colossians 2:13) When he reached the end of his sermon and made the call to decision, Dad would mutter, "If you want to see all the decisions dead people make, just visit the cemetery." As we would say it today, "Good luck with that."

This idea of making a decision for Christ is one formulation of the general error of synergism. The first part of that word, *syn*, means with, together, or combined. The second part, *ergism*, comes from a Greek word, *ergon*, which speaks of power or work. For example, Philippians 1:6 says, “He who has begun a good work [*ergon*] in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” Synergism speaks of more than one power working together and combining to produce an effect. Relating to conversion, synergism is the doctrine that the powers of God and man work together and combine to produce conversion.

Luther teaches that God’s power alone, without any power, work, or cooperation of man, converts sinners. Synergism runs counter to Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, where he says:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

Why does Luther say this? Why the dim view of man? He says this because the Bible is loaded full and spilling over with it. The Bible says this in a variety of ways at the verse level. It says it in a variety of ways at the levels of events, story, and narrative. Let us look at examples at each of those levels.

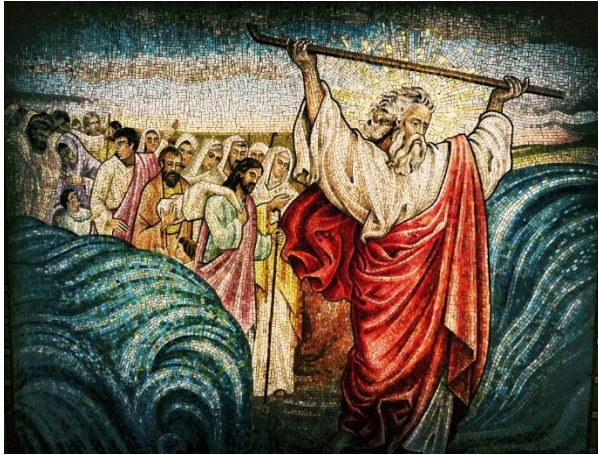
Exodus: a Complete Picture of Sin and Salvation

One of the most prominent events and narratives in the Bible is the exodus. This is a complete picture of sin and salvation. It shows the helpless condition of sinners before regeneration. Our enemies, our Savior, and the Savior’s means of grace all are represented.

The Hebrews are in bondage, which is the picture and condition of people in sin. Pharaoh is like the Devil. Egypt is like the world. The slavish character of the Hebrews, who will yearn to return to Egypt, is like the sinful self. They do not – because they cannot – free themselves.



Salvation comes by Moses, an outside deliverer, like Christ. At his hand, even many powerful plagues do not make Pharaoh willing to let the Hebrews go into the wilderness to worship God. But do not miss this: those many powerful plagues also do not make the



Hebrews willing to leave Egypt or willing to go into the wilderness to worship God. Instead, God compels their enemies to drive them to freedom. The death of the firstborn sons, like the death of the Only Begotten Son, drives Pharaoh and his armies to drive the Hebrews to the Red Sea where they are baptized (1 Corinthians 10:1-2), and then eat and drink Communion (1 Corinthians 10:3-4).

On the mount of transfiguration, Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah concerning the decease – the exodus – he should accomplish at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:31) The word Luke uses for decease (death or departure) in that event is ἔξοδος, exodos. The exodus for sinners is the death of Christ and our being baptized into his death.

Verses: Hammering, Hammering against Human Power

At the verse level, there is an expansive catalog of scriptural statements excluding any reason or strength in man to believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. Those verses put into so many words what we see in story form in the exodus, and from there, the depiction only gets grimmer.

Before regeneration, man is a slave to sin (John 8:34), sold under sin (Romans 7:14), a slave of corruption and brought into bondage (1 Peter 2:19), is in the snare of the Devil and taken captive by him to do his will (1 Timothy 2:16), in the power of Satan (Acts 26:18), and in captivity (Ephesians 4:8).

Before regeneration, man is dark, ignorant, and blind. (Ephesians 4:18, 5:8, 4:3-4; John 1:5; Acts 26:18; Romans 1:21) “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14) In this condition, “there is none who understands.” (Romans 3:10)

Before regeneration, man is lost, and he does not find himself nor find God. Rather, he needs Jesus to seek and to save the lost. (Matthew 18:11; Luke 19:10) In man’s lost condition, “there is none who seeks after God.” (Romans 3:10)

Before regeneration, man is hard-hearted, has a heart of stone, and an impenitent heart. He needs to be given a new heart and a new spirit. (Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:25; Romans 2:5)

Before regeneration, man is filled to overflowing with evil intent. Not only is the imagination of man's heart evil from its youth (Genesis 8:21), but "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5)

Given all this, before regeneration, man is enmity and hostility against God. (Romans 8:6-7; Galatians 5:16-17). This enmity makes man incapable of being subject to the Law of God. He "is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." (Romans 8:7)

The carnal mindedness of man is death. Paul says, "to be carnally minded is death." (Romans 8:6). This brings us full circle to Graham's own preaching that man by nature is dead in trespasses and sins. Dead men do not raise themselves to life, shine light into their own hearts, free themselves from bondage, repent of their evil intent, reconcile their hostility and enmity against God, find their way out of being lost, nor reason their way to understanding.

Instead, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." (John 6:44) "Without Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) We have no sufficiency "of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves." (2 Corinthians 3:5) Paul confesses, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find." (Romans 7:18)

We have no idea how deceitful our hearts are. Precisely because of our sin, we do not know our sinfulness. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked [incurably sick]; Who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) The testimony of the Law whereby we know our sin is an article of faith. By faith we confess, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil." (Jeremiah 13:23)

The Holy Spirit's Work

Understanding does not come by our reason, but by God's choosing and calling. (Matthew 13:11; 1 Corinthians 1:21-31) "It is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6) God opens our eyes (Acts 26:18) and enlightens the eyes of our understanding (Ephesians 1:18).

God creates in us a clean heart. (Psalm 51:10) He gives us a new heart and puts a new spirit within us. (Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26-27; Deuteronomy 30:6) It is with us as it is with Lydia. “The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.” (Acts 16:14)

Repentance is a gift. As the servant of God patiently teaches those in opposition,

God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:25)

“It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13) Therefore, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” (Luke 3{8)

The Bible teaches what Luther echoes. “The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” The Holy Spirit uses means, the Gospel and his gifts, which are the Word and Sacraments.

We ought not take from the Spirit the glory due to him for his work of converting us to Christ. Synergism exalts man for what the Spirit does. When we see the truth about the Spirit, no wonder the Nicene Creed confesses that the Holy Spirit “with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.” Let him be worshiped and glorified also among us for his great sanctifying work of converting us to Christ and keeping us in the true faith. Let us praise him for his humility in this work, where He calls no attention to himself, but works by means — preaching, Baptism, and Communion — and points not to himself, but to Christ.