

When Lutherans Exaggerate Otherwise Valid Objections to “Decision” Theology

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My title baits the question that must be asked: “Why should we have this conversation at all?” My reply is that the slightest appeal to any kind of theology that hints of *human* decision has long been a conversation-stopper in most Lutheran circles. That is not the way it either should, or needs, to be. Lutherans have nothing to lose but much to gain, in advancing discussion toward the biblical key to this matter. Furthermore, biblically speaking, the dual themes of *God’s* providence, and *human* perceptions of that process, are separate categories that do not necessarily contradict each other (Genesis 50:20). Both aspects can happen together, while we at the same time acknowledge that God is the sole active initiator of the entire event. I am not suggesting we Lutherans compromise on our theology, but instead that in our interaction with others we open avenues for sharing our unique insights with them. Lutheran theology offers an important corrective to the perspectives maintained by advocates of “decision theology,” even as deeper reflection on our own part on both Scripture and our Confessional documents tempers typical, well-meaning yet exaggerated, statements that obscure the actual Lutheran position that sinners have the capacity to *resist* the Gospel. Christians across all denominations need to speak *to* (as opposed to talk *past*) each other, even as we learn to learn from one another. As matters currently stand however, our entrenched resistance to further consideration of the theme of this paper is hindering our evangelistic effectiveness.

In consideration of the “separate-categories” theme that I just mentioned, I offer as an example a brief account of the following event: In 2004, humanists and atheists across the world were shaken by the announcement of the profound conversion of, arguably, their most formidable intellectual leader. Antony Flew, who had for decades crafted what were reputedly the strongest arguments ever penned in support of atheism, changed his mind on that matter and so acknowledged publically his new conviction that God *does* exist. When he highlighted the list of recent scientific discoveries which led him to his intellectual conversion,¹ he was faced with a barrage of condescending questions as to what could possibly have possessed him to embrace his so-called “god” decision. His reply to their rebukes was that (following on Socrates’ dictum) “*We must follow the argument wherever it leads.*”² My question then is this: Was Flew’s intellectual “conversion” solely a biographical journey or was it a work of the Holy Spirit, or both? It is, after all, one thing to claim as one’s ideal to follow evidence where it leads. But it is altogether another matter to, over time, do so *against* one’s own perceived self-interests. Clearly the mounting scientific evidence that indicated the existence of an intelligent designer (God) progressively weakened that same atheistic position that he had become

¹ Antony Flew. “A Pilgrimage of Reason.” [There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind](#). (Harper One, 2007).

² *Ibid.* p. 89.

famous for advocating. Now Scripture describes the mental aspect of our sinful state as human beings, as tending toward the denial (often subconsciously) of those sets of facts from nature which convict us of God's rightful lordship (Romans 1:18-32). For this reason, I judge that, at the same time that it was the facts of nature that convinced Dr. Flew of the reality of God, it was actually the on-going work of the Holy Spirit upon him which led him (contrary to his self-interests) to acknowledge God's existence. The Holy Spirit works, not in contradiction to reason, but by means of facts and reasons, to lead us to the truth, not merely about nature, but also God, and our very selves (1 John 1:9). An associate of mine who is also a Lutheran pastor in the LCMS strongly disapproves of the concept of self-described "seeker" churches on the grounds that no one ever seeks after God apart from the drawing power of the Holy Spirit. I do not disagree with his assumption, but at the same time I do believe the Holy Spirit may, through a course of events in a person's life, be preparing the same to be ultimately receptive to the Gospel. God can use such means as may be outside of, and so not *directly* related to, "the Word" (consider Saul's encounter with the risen Christ – Acts 9:1-9). So while it is prudent for Christians to honor God's normal means of leading people to faith in Christ through the instrumentation of His Word,³ it is presumptuous to assume that God can *never* choose **extra-biblical** events to prepare human hearts to ultimately receive Him.⁴

The power of the Holy Spirit, with respect to saving faith, is best described not as a key that unlocks the door to faith (which we already exercise, albeit wrongly directed, in false gods), but as a prying hand that releases our irrational grip on the false gods that cannot save us. It is false to suggest that humans lack *ontological*⁵ control over whether we believe or have faith. The word "Belief," as the New Testament regularly frames it, is an expected response to a command (e.g. Acts 16:30), which says "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.*" The word "believe" is here grammatically employed in the imperative form.⁶ Indeed the terms

³ Montanus lived in the mid-2nd Century AD, wrong over-emphasized the working of the Holy Spirit to freely operate outside of the text of the Scriptures. (J.L. Neve. *A History of Christian Thought*, v. 1. (Muhlenberg Press, 1946), p. 59.

⁴ I believe C.F.W. Walther overstates the matter when he says, "*The Holy Spirit who must work all good in a person does not work without means. The word is the means of grace, indeed the only means through which He works. Even Baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of grace only because of the word, because the visible outward elements are connected with the divine word. Without the word Baptism would be plain water and no baptism, and the Lord's Supper would not be Christ's body and blood, but merely bread and wine. God's word is, as it were, the hand God extends to us from heaven in order to lift us up to Himself. Whoever does not hear God's word turns away from God's hand and therefore cannot be saved. God's word is not only the only means which shows us the way to heaven, it is also the only way by which men, who are all spiritually dead by nature, are awakened. It is also the only way by which men are enlightened, so that they learn to know themselves and Christ aright. Only God's word works faith in Christ.*" (C.F.W. Walther. *Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter, 1859.* (<http://cfwwalther.com/myers/walther8.htm>)).

⁵ "Ontos" is the philosophical category that addresses "being-ness" or "existence."

⁶ The distinction Luther draws between the employment of imperatives in Scripture and the impotency of our capacity to respond as fallen sinners (Martin Luther. "Bondage of the Will." Philip Watson, ed. *Luther's Works*. v. 33. (Fortress 1972), p. 127), **does not negate** the central point of this paper.

“belief,” “faith,” and “receive” (John 1:12)⁷, consistently entail our human decision to yield⁸ one’s trust *in* (entrust) a particular object, namely Christ (John 3:16), as opposed to an idol. Every single human being regularly exercises faith in our daily lives. The word “idolatry” identifies our strong tendency is to place our faith in false gods (“idols”). Again, our relentless resistance to God’s gracious invitation to His salvation in Christ is not an *ontological* problem (as though God specifically designed our natures to resist Him). It is instead a *moral* problem. We have absurdly become enemies of God by our participation in Adam’s Fall (Genesis 3:7f., Romans 5:12a, 1 Corinthians 15:21, 22) and our individual willful practice of sin (“*because all sinned*” -- Romans 5:12b). The *moral* aspect to our separation from God’s grace is grounded on our sinful desire to prefer life on our *own* terms’ as opposed to submitting to God’s lordship.⁹ The Bible is emphatically clear that fallen human beings neither initiate a relationship with God, nor in any way cooperate in the establishment of that relationship.¹⁰ Conversion to Christ is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther is wholly correct, and helpfully so, in his explanation of the third article of the Apostle’s Creed on this matter.¹¹ It is furthermore necessary to emphasize the basis of Holy Scripture as the grounds for insisting that God is always the initiator in our salvation.¹² Given our resistance to His saving lordship, we must thank God that that is indeed so.

On the other hand, Lutherans tend to so fixate on that truth in an unhealthy (and consequently unhelpful) way by effectively turning such enormously good news into a club to beat down the naivety of younger believers as well as our fellow brothers and sisters who focus on other matters. I see little point in bemoaning the common expression of such terms as “*I came to Christ*,” “*I have decided to follow Jesus*,” and “*Choose Christ*,”) for several reasons. Firstly, we are in no position to deny the reality of the experiences of other persons who, in their own minds, made a conscious decision to believe in Christ. Second, our exaggerated concern about their choice of language invariably becomes a foundation by which to judge them, as opposed to acknowledging the occasion to instead celebrate *with* them because of the far more important reality that they have entered into God’s heavenly kingdom as Christians.

⁷ “To become a child of God **requires** more, as already said, namely, that we **accept** Christ...**believe** in His name...[and] **receive** the ‘power to become children of God’” (boldface mine). (Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. “Martin Luther’s Sermons on the Gospel of John: Chapters 1-4.” *Luther’s Works*, v. 22. (Concordia, 1957), p.100.

⁸ Luther qualifies the previous notation (ibid) by highlighting the **passive** aspect of our receptivity to the Gospel in his “Bondage of the Will.” Op.cit (6). p.157.

⁹ “When a man is **without** the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will...but he does it of his own accord and with a ready will.” Op.cit. (6). p.64 (boldface mine).

¹⁰ “In relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a man has no free choice, but is a captive, subject and slave either of the will of God or the will of Satan.” Op.cit. (6). p.70f, 148.

¹¹ “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...” (Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions – A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord. (Concordia, 2006), p. 456).

¹² “We also reject the work of the Pelagians. They taught that a person **by his own powers** [that is], **without the Holy Spirit’s grace**, can turn himself to God...” (“Formula of Concord: Epitome,” art. II. *The Book of Concord*. Ibid. p.648). (boldface mine). Notice that the specific argument the Reformers were making against the Pelagians is identical to the premise of my paper, that God is the sole and entire initiator of our relationship with Him.

Third, it is entirely possible, theologically, for God in His providence, to entirely be the initiator over conversion events that also entail a response on the part of humans¹³ in a manner that we for our part may perceive, from *our human perspective*, to be *our* decision. Indeed, there really is a dialectic aspect of this process (God's initiation and our response). After all, our Lutheran Confessional Writings make clear that God does not do the deciding over whether we will or will not ultimately receive Him. We are an autonomous party in the conversion process that God wholly initiates.¹⁴

¹³ "[The human will] *does nothing*. It is rather the substance...in which the Holy Spirit works also in those who resist...But working on the will of him who resists He moves the will to **consent**" (boldface mine). Ewald Plass, ed. What Luther Says. v.l. (Concordia, 1959), no. 1025. ** "Unbelievers resist the will of God by not obeying the Word and not wanting to accept it." (no. 1025). ** "Even God Himself cannot give heaven to the person who does not believe." (no. 1031). ** "Any person not willfully resisting, receives faith." C.F.W. Walther. Law and Gospel. (Concordia reprint, 1897), p. 15.

¹⁴ "The reason why all who hear the Word do not come to faith and therefore receive the greater damnation is not that God did not want them to be saved. It is their own fault because they heard the Word of God not to learn but only to despise, blaspheme, and ridicule it..." (Ted Tappert, ed. "Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration." art. XI. The Book of Concord. (Fortress, 1959), p.629).