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## Conversion after Death.

A Criticism of Prof. O. Hallesby.

W. H. T. DAU, St. Louis, Mo.

Prof. O. Hallesby of the *Menighetsfakultet* at Oslo, practically a theological seminary within the Norwegian State Church, enjoys the reputation of a conservative, yea, an orthodox Lutheran theologian. He recently visited his countrymen in the United States and was well received in the Norwegian Lutheran churches. His opposition, some years ago, to the liberalism which has become dominant also in the Lutheran Church of Norway attracted a good deal of attention and brought him well-merited praise, for he did champion the cause of a purer Lutheran faith than that held by leading Norwegian churchmen. It is likely, however, that his Lutheran orthodoxy must be discounted, and that in him the Church is witnessing another instance of a conservatism in doctrine that is merely a reduced liberalism—a phenomenon not infrequently observed among the Fundamentalists in our country in their controversy with the Modernists. In a criticism of the professor's teaching, *Redaktoer* Axel B. Svensson (*Nya Vaektaren*, February, 1925) offers food for reflection. He heads his article: "Is there a Conversion <sup>1)</sup> after Death? Some Reflections Elicited by an Article of Prof. O. Hallesby." The chief interest which our readers will have in this article is not so much the fact that it is a criticism of Professor Hallesby, whom few of our readers know, as rather the point of doctrine that is discussed. Mr. Svensson says:

"The question concerning the possibility of conversion after death is quite old. Within the Christian Church teachers could be pointed out at nearly all times who answered the question affirmatively. It happens that in our days the overwhelming majority of theologians believes that an improvement and con-

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1) The Swedish term is *baettring*, which is equal to the German *Besserung*.

version<sup>2)</sup> may take place even in the domain of the dead. Among the advocates of this view there are found many important men in olden times, and that in our day it is not radical theologians only who embrace this doctrine appears, amongst others, from an article of Prof. O. Hallesby which was published in *For Fattig og Rik* [For Poor and Rich].

“Even in our country [Sweden] the Norwegian professor enjoys great confidence in religious circles, and we would commit a grave neglect of duty if we failed to express our opinion of the aforementioned article. As regards his doctrinal position, the article contains nothing that the professor has not allowed to come to light already in his *Troslaere*;<sup>3)</sup> it is, however, significant inasmuch as it leads one to fear that his advancement from the left to the right, which was characteristic of Hallesby and full of promise, has now come to an end.

“To those who have read Hallesby and know him not through his preaching only or through some lecture it is no secret that he certainly does not take the old believing standpoint in all points of doctrine. For instance, he does not believe that the entire Bible is God’s Word in the sense that everything that is written therein has come into it by divine inspiration, and on several other points he occupies a standpoint that departs from the Confessions. Among these points of doctrine is also the one concerning conversion after death. One would be pretty sure of rendering himself guilty of an incorrect judgment by maintaining that Hallesby occupies a position more true to the Confessions than, for instance, the Swedish professor Kolmodin. Weighed in the balances of fidelity to the Confessions, they still poise fairly even, although, of course, they are out of balance in one point or another. And yet there is a great difference between them, so great that it has kept us hitherto from taking a stand against Professor Hallesby.

“Professor Kolmodin’s development has plainly advanced from old-time confessional fidelity with a pietistic coloring to a position that has become modernist in many important points. As a result, his fidelity to the Confessions has entirely disappeared as if by some bleaching process, while his pietism proves itself to be altogether of fast color.<sup>4)</sup> The result of this, again, has been that he

2) *bactring och omvaendelse*.

3) *Glaubenslehre*, Doctrine of Faith — the title of Dr. Hallesby’s *Dogmatik*.

4) *traettaekta*, the German *waschecht*.

is embraced with great confidence even by many who certainly do not approve his theological departures from the old faith. They have overlooked the fact that a development from right to left is a development in a faulty and dangerous direction, a development which renders its representative—no matter in what personal relation to him one may stand—a danger to many an old-time believer. He is that spite of the fact that he may be said to have been a help to missions, to doubting students, and in the war with a plainly radical theology.

“The case of Professor Hallesby is entirely different. He hails from the radical camp, and his development has been from left to right. That is the true direction. His progress hitherto has not been from faith to unbelief, but he has passed from doubt to old-time faith. There has really been ground for hoping that the day would come when he would fully stand, in every respect, upon the basis of the Evangelical Lutheran Confessions, even though the pietistic coloring is seen in him, and that quite strong. Just for the reason that he was headed in the right direction, one was induced to believe that his activity was being blessed, and there is much evidence that it was. Of course, one could not avoid a curious expectation in regard to particular matters: one was compelled to wish that the day would come when he would refute some of his own statements in *Troslaeren*; his open-minded honesty justified the conviction that, if some day he would come to see that he had erred, he would frankly acknowledge the fact.

“However, in the aforementioned article in *For Fattig og Rik* he comes forward now and maintains with very great definitiveness the view that opportunities for conversion will be afforded even after death—a doctrine which, as far as we know, he has held from the very beginning of his appearing in public. We had hoped that this doctrine was part of the old leaven in him of which he would gradually become purged. If his development in the right direction had continued, this hope would certainly have been realized. But, alas! from his article one receives this impression, amongst others, that one is listening to a person who has arrived at a point where he stands calculating whether his development in the right direction shall be continued, or whether it is concluded. There is no direct statement to that effect, but the tone of his speech suggests it.

“The Professor introduces his article with these words: ‘I have been informed recently that some of my brethren in the faith have been troubled and grieved over my doctrine concerning

the redeeming work of Christ in the realm of the dead, which in popular parlance is called "conversion after death."

"When I heard this it caused me not a little sadness; for I would not, indeed, cause my brethren worry. However, I do not see that I can do anything in the matter. For what I have written about this question I have written because I was convinced in my inmost heart that it was in accordance with God's Word."

"And now he proceeds to state more precisely his standpoint, which yet seems quite undefined because he pays no attention whatever to logical consequences. He states emphatically that he does not at all believe in an opportunity *for us* [*italics mine*] to be converted after death. Accordingly, he does not deny eternal punishment. He expresses his astonishment that among the Christians in Norway there are some who would saddle on him the doctrine that ultimately all men will be saved. One can well understand his resentment over these accusations, which, it cannot be denied, are unjustified from his point of view. But if he had kept his eyes open to the consequences resulting from his own teaching, he would have understood quite well those whom he now regards as slanderers. For if there is a possibility of conversion after death for some, commonest justice demands that all shall have that possibility, because between grace offered within the limits of time and grace offered within the limits of eternity we cannot place the sign of equality. No comparison is possible at this point. The standpoint occupied by Hallesby is logically untenable. However, that would be of little moment, because men's logic is often 'a strange critter,' and it can certainly happen that God's logic lies upon a plane so high that we can never grasp it here in time; His thoughts are higher than ours. But the doctrine of conversion after death is unbiblical, and that settles the matter.

"Next, Professor Hallesby cites quite a number of teachers of the Church who have held the same or a similar opinion as himself. He admits, however, that the question cannot be decided by any kind of a majority resolution. It is good that this is so; for even if that could be done, the Professor would not be able to line up the required majority. The Confession of the Christian Church is the expression of its faith, and in that Confession there is not a word said concerning a doctrine of conversion after death as an integral part of the Christian faith. As great as the authority of the Church's Confession is, still it could not change truth into a lie nor a lie into truth. Scripture remains the one real judge of all doctrines, as the reformers so vigorously maintained.

Accordingly, we leave entirely out of consideration what this or that teacher of the Church believed and taught regarding the question under discussion. What we are after is to see what the Bible teaches.

"In support of his doctrine Professor Hallesby really adduces only two Bible-passages. They are 1 Pet. 3, 18—20 and 4, 6. On the interpretation of these two passages opinions have been divided for some time, especially as regards the former passage, which will have to be regarded as the most important. For in 1 Pet. 4, 6 there is nothing said plainly and clearly regarding the time of the Gospel-preaching mentioned in that text. There is nothing in that text that would prohibit us from understanding the word of the apostle thus, *viz.*, he says that even to those who are now dead the Gospel was preached while they were living. Certainly one can, as Hallesby and many with him are doing, find in the aforementioned Bible-text a claim that the Gospel is being preached to the spirits of departed men, and viewed from the linguistic side such a reading lies nearest.<sup>5)</sup> But that eliminates the fact that a number of Bible-passages definitely deny that any conversion is possible after death. It cannot be right that in the one Bible-text in question, which seems to contain either one of two meanings, we should on a very weak linguistic ground choose that meaning which comes in plain conflict with the teaching that prevails throughout the Scriptures. Herewith we drop this text.

"1 Pet. 3, 18—20 presents greater difficulties. Here it could be maintained with reason that the word *phylake*, which has been rendered by *faengelse* (prison) in our translation, is often used in Greek literature to denote a limited measure or time beyond which one cannot go, as, for instance, a staked-off space, a prison in the ordinary meaning. And there is quite a weighty reason for the view, suggested by Gen. 6, 3, that in the present instance the word really points to a definite time.<sup>6)</sup> However, what is re-

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5) I do not think this view is tenable, because the text does not speak of "spirits of the departed." Moreover, the verb in this text is in the aorist, not in the present tense. Lastly, the men to whom the apostle here refers underwent a judgment in the flesh, or as regards the flesh, as the Gospel was preached to them. This could not apply to disembodied spirits.

6) Too much, I think, is conceded here. The only plain texts in the New Testament where *phylake* signifies a space of time is in its application to the various "watches" of the night, and then it is given with some numeral. To transfer that meaning to 1 Pet. 3, 19, where *en phylake* is a prepositional phrase qualifying *tois pneumasin* is, to say the least, a rather desperate attempt.

quired here is not a philological discussion, but a determination not to frame any ideas beyond what is written.

“Accordingly, we shall call attention to another matter that has often surprised us when reading expositions of the text before us. The apostle indicates, if one takes his words in their ordinary meaning, that the “prison” signifies the place where the spirits of the men who perished in the Flood dwelt, but he does not indicate with one word that Christ preached *in* the prison.<sup>7)</sup> It is of great importance that nothing be put into a Bible-text that is not contained in it. The apostle does not say that Christ in the spirit departed and preached in prison to spirits who were in that place. It is safest to let the Word of God stand as it is. But if, in an attempt to obtain an understanding of the contents of this text, one should demand a paraphrase of it, it would be much better to let this be the content: Christ went in spirit and preached to spirits who were in prison.

“However, this entire question regarding the place and time of Christ’s preaching to spirits may be regarded as a discussion beside the mark. *For there is not one word in the text that gives one the right to infer that the preaching in question was a proclamation of the Gospel or led to the conversion of any one.* When Professor Hallesby assumes that the preaching now under discussion was a proclamation of the Gospel for such as had died in unbelief, that is no more than an assumption. There is no support for this assumption in the text. Nor does it afford any solid basis for the ancient interpretation (which, however, is at least not contrary to Scripture) that in this preaching Christ announced to the unbelieving His victory, in order to show them that they were justly damned because they did not believe the preaching of Noah. The text states clearly and plainly only this, that Christ preached to the spirits in prison. We repeat that the text contains nothing which gives us the right to infer that there is an opportunity for conversion after death. It has not pleased the Lord to let us know more about this matter, and we must learn to obey God’s Word

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7) I cannot see that anything is gained by this instance. Besides, taking the words in their ordinary meaning, this is what they say: “Having gone, He preached to the spirits in prison.” The preaching took place to the spirits, and in order to preach, Christ went where the spirits were. The meaning that connects most naturally with these words is that the preaching took place where the spirits were, and that was “in prison.” Of course, Christ could have made the spirits understand Him from ever so great a distance, but in that case it is queer that He should have *gone* (*poroutheis*) to their place.

and 'not think beyond what is written.' Even professors of theology must submit to this admonition of Paul.

"Such is the poor support for this misleading doctrine of the possibility of conversion after death that its champions must for their strongest proof appeal to a Bible-text that indeed speaks of preaching, but gives no hint of conversion. Verily, a mighty poor support!

"The Bible knows of not more than two states after death. Those who die believing are saved, and the consummation of their salvation takes place after their resurrection. Those who die unbelieving are damned, and the consummation of their damnation takes place after their resurrection. To what extent there are degrees in blessedness we leave undecided, since it does not devolve upon us to bring on an unnecessary discussion, and since there is ground for different interpretations of Scripture regarding this matter. For instance, Scripture teaches that the heathen who sin without the Law perish without the Law. Accordingly, we who have the Law cannot perish without the Law. If we are lost, our perdition is in accordance with the Law, and that means everlasting torment in hell. What the meaning of perishing without the Law may be we do not know. We only know that it does *not* mean the same thing as being saved, but is a loss. But when the Savior speaks of a condition that shall be 'tolerable in the Day of Judgment' and clearly indicates that such shall be the condition of those who had no opportunity of grace, or only a small one, He therewith comes to the aid of those who might perhaps be led into doubting the goodness of God, *viz.*, if they were forced to believe that the Lord judges the poor heathen just as severely as us Christians. For when the Lord says that such will be the condition of those who are lost without having had an opportunity of grace or only a small one, then our condition on Judgment Day will be altogether unbearable. Of this there is no doubt.

"But of a mission to the dead or conversion after death Scripture says nothing. There is not a single text that teaches such a doctrine provided the words are allowed to stand as they stand. If we are to read out of the Bible a doctrine of an opportunity for grace after death, we shall, on the one hand, have to twist and turn a number of texts, forcing them to yield a meaning that we had desired beforehand, and, on the other hand, we shall have to look away from many passages which clearly teach us that 'in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be.' This may prove shocking, but — it is so.

“According to Scripture, man consists of body, soul, and spirit. In death, soul and spirit separate from the body, which decomposes. The body has received impressions from the qualities of the soul and spirit indwelling in it. A drunkard’s body craves spirits, a harlot’s and fornicator’s licentious affairs that are aflame with lust. Now, if the soul and spirit after their separation from the body become converted to God, where will they go on the day of resurrection? Can they be united in bliss with the godless body, which, according to Scripture, must also be sanctified? It had in the mean time undergone no sanctifying process, just as little as the dead bodies of other unconverted men. Shall the harlot’s lips trained to smutty songs be able to sing the new song of the Lamb?

“As an absolute and indispensable condition of our sharing in the resurrection of the righteous the Bible stipulates that the Spirit of God shall have dwelt in us during our lifetime. In Rom. 8, 11 we read: ‘If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you.’ Here is a plain and clear statement, and we are, indeed, wondering whether Professor Hallesby, after pondering the contents of this statement, can uphold his teaching that man is converted after death. If he does, he will stick fast in his tracks, and then it will not be long before his development will have to proceed in a different direction from the one which was noticeable so far. But we are sincerely hoping that this man, who is in such a high degree qualified especially for speaking to our academic youth, will not be caught in any erroneous teaching, but in the future as in the past will develop in a direction away from doubt and misbelief to old-time faith. We are hoping for the day to come when he will, in a much better way than we ourselves are able, go forth to battle both against the doctrine of conversion after death, which lulls men to sleep, and against the rather incautious and fatal Bible criticism for which he now wants to claim a place in positive faith in the Bible.”

Every lover and well-wisher of our Lutheran Zion will support this Christian wish and pray that all who are still caught in any unscriptural notion will be enabled by the grace of our Lord to struggle out of the meshes that hold them and come into the full light and freedom of that faith which has written on its banner:

*Οὐδὲν ἄτερο γοαρῆς!*

In its March issue *Nya Vaektaren* refers once more to Pro-



fessor Hallesby and says: "Recently he delivered two public lectures here in Stockholm in which he attacked liberal theology and the liberal theologians. It goes without saying that on many points he maintained the truth. For our part we have no exceptions to take as regards the attack upon the Liberals in this lecture. They deserve all that they got. In particular, the last of the Professor's two lectures was excellent, and it was not its least merit that he directed attention to those who, spite of lively assertions of their own positive faith, spread their sheltering and protecting wings over liberal theologians. As examples in Sweden of such peaceable conservatives the speaker named Bishop Danell and Pastor Valdus Bengtsson.

"There is no reason whatever why we should rise in defense of these gentlemen. However, we think we ought to inform Professor Hallesby amongst other things of the fact that the last-named gentleman has very likely entered into as intimate connections and sympathies [with liberal theology] as the professors in the two organizations which arranged the meeting [at which Professor Hallesby spoke]. The unquestioned facts in the case are these: *Fosterlandsstiftelsen* some time ago excluded from its fellowship and cooperation the *Bibeltrogna Vaenner* [see THEOL. MONTHLY, II, 289], although the latter fully maintained the Evangelical Lutheran Confessions in every point. The real reason for this expulsion was because the *Bibeltrogna Vaenner* would not and could not keep silent over against liberal tendencies which began to manifest themselves in *Evangelisk Fosterlandsstiftelsen*. The *Bibeltrogna Vaenner* continued their fight as best they could. We rejoice over every good handshake we receive in this fight. Nothing would please us more than if Professor Hallesby would wholly and fully occupy the standpoint of the old Bible faith. As long as he does not do this, but maintains that 'there are errors in the Bible,' — and this refers not to the so-called apographa, or so-called interpolations, — we cannot with unmixed joy behold his appearance in public. For his strokes have partly lost their keenness because of his attitude in the Bible controversy, which is liberal in principle. This becomes manifest, for instance, in his debate with Pastor Anskar. We can also understand why a person like Valdus Bengtsson, who takes the identical position in the Bible controversy, should avoid taking a definite stand away from the plainly liberal. Naturally he reasons thus: I believe myself that the Bible is not the infallible Word of God; how, then, can I condemn so decidedly those who entertain doubts concerning

several more points than I myself? Now, that is not what Professor Hallesby thinks; but he blazes away with a big gun against any one who questions the truth of the Apostle's Creed in any point. And that is perfectly right. But his position would be twice as strong if he were to believe himself 'all that is written in the Law and the prophets.' If he were to do that, we should not only regard him as one of the best professional theologians of our time, but we should joyfully extend to him the hand of brotherly fellowship without reservation."

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