

We Believe

Commentary on the
Statement of Faith

Church of the
Lutheran Brethren

Dr. Timothy Ysteboe

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PREFACE

I gave a little thought to the idea of titling this work, “This is most certainly true.” But that seemed a bit arrogant, especially in a time when claims to know the truth are almost despised, so it doesn’t have that title. But I do worry that despair in our culture over inability to know the truth absolutely has resulted in not trying to know the truth at all.

There are many fine works on what we believe, from *Luther’s Small Catechism* to Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*. They speak to different audiences. This work only seeks to address the Church of the Lutheran Brethren Statement of Faith. Written for an adult lay audience, this work is more specific than the *Catechism* and is nowhere near as exhaustive as Pieper.

This commentary arose out of my concern that we know what we believe. Versions of it have been on my various hard drives for at least 15 years. It began as teaching notes for Lutheran Brethren Seminary students and became an expanded discussion on the Church of the Lutheran Brethren Statement of Faith for people inquiring about the CLB. I hope this commentary gives support to those who teach in the church, to those who lead small groups, and to those who are in church governance positions. You need more than the *Explanation*, I think, but I doubt you will venture into Pieper. So here is what we believe.

Dr. Tim Ysteboe

APPRECIATION

The apostle Peter wrote, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10).

In writing this commentary on the Statement of Faith of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren, my friend and colleague Tim Ysteboe has exercised one of his spirited gifts to serve many of us in the CLB.

Writing is hard work, but Tim did not shy away from the labor of producing this valuable volume. It will be of great benefit to pastors, elders and adult lay leaders seeking to read, reflect and pray their way to a more mature Christian confession of faith. To be able to say about an article of Christian truth, “this is what I believe about it and this is why...” — that’s worth a lot!

On behalf of a grateful Church,
Pastor John C. Kilde

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INTRODUCTION

This commentary on the Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith is written for Church leaders, and especially for elders of the local congregation. In the New Testament, elders were appointed by the Apostles Peter and Paul to give guidance to the people and the ministries of their congregations (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28). The constitution of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren affirms that the office of elder has been given to the Church to ensure that the work is carried out in accordance with God's Word.

The Elders' Work

Elders are commanded by the Apostle Paul to guard the flock from "savagewolves" who distort the truth (Acts 20:29-30). The CLB constitution, printed annually in the CLB yearbook, charges elders to "watch over the spiritual condition of the congregation, and insure that the work is done in accordance with the Word of God" (CLB Constitution, By-Laws Article II, Paragraph B). In their ordination vows, elders commit to watching over the flock in such a way that "no false teaching which is contrary to God's Word makes its way into the church" (CLB Ministerial Acts, 1993, Section I-11).

Elders are commissioned to govern the church. Their work includes oversight of all the ministries of the congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2). The CLB elder ordination ritual asks them "to work for the purity, edification, peace and growth of the church of Jesus Christ" (CLB Ministerial Acts, 1993, Section I-11). In many Lutheran Brethren congregations, the church constitution does not permit any ministry of the church to be organized or disbanded without the consent of the elder board.

Elders also have responsibility for their own personal growth. They will want to be growing in the qualities that characterize an elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). On an elder board, each one holds the others accountable for growth in these qualities. An elder will never arrive at full possession of all these qualities, but he will always be growing in these virtues and abilities.

Each of these responsibilities requires that elders be men who are students of the Bible and teachers of the theological perspective of the church they serve. R. C. Sproul wrote:

Every Christian is a theologian. We are always engaged in the activity of learning about the things of God. We are not all theologians in the professional or academic sense, but theologians we are, for better or for worse. The "for worse" is no small matter. Second Peter warns

that heresies are destructive to the people of God and are blasphemies committed against God. They are destructive because theology touches every dimension of our lives (Sproul, 1992, p. vii).

Elders need to be "for better" theologians — not just for public teaching situations, but also for private instruction and correction, for organizational planning, and for oversight of the congregation's teaching ministries.

The Elders' Contexts

Historical-theological context

The congregations of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren are the product of Lutheran Pietism, a movement of spiritual renewal that influenced Northern European Christianity in the 17th to 19th centuries. There are a number of feeder streams in this tradition: the Lutheran Reformation, the presence of a state church in Europe, and the lay ministry movement, especially in Norway.

The Lutheran Reformation gave us our theological perspective that helps us understand the truths of the Bible. The Pietistic movement gave us our emphasis on living out those truths in our daily lives. The Norwegian Lutheran Free Church gave us a form of congregational management in which the power of the clergy is balanced by a governing board of elders. The lay ministry movement gave us the tradition that these elders do not merely govern, but are active in the spiritual life and ministry of the church.

Social-cultural context

There are a number of social-cultural factors that are important to consider when planning church ministries and preparing people for church leadership. One is mobility. When people move geographically, they tend to move greater distances than in the past. They are more often taken out of the ministry area of one congregation and into the ministry area of another. Even when there is no home relocation, people tend to move from one church to another more often than in the past. This means there is less continuity in the congregation and an increased need for the elders to provide stability to the congregation.

Another factor is decreased denominational loyalty. When people move to a new location, they are more likely to choose a church based on schedules and services than on a denominational affiliation. This means that people coming into a church may not be in harmony with the teaching position of the church. The elders need to be conscious of this and provide more teaching before commissioning these people into congregational ministry. The elders also need to provide teaching for the congregation if they sense that denominational distinctive doctrines are becoming devalued.

Add to these factors the current combination of pluralism and relativism, which deny the church's position on absolute, eternal truth, and the related idea that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. In this social-cultural context, elders are responsible for the teaching position of the church and the protection of the flock from the wolves of false teaching. The Apostle Paul wrote that the work of leadership is to bring doctrinal stability to

the church so that people are no longer tossed around like corks on the waves of distorted teaching and deceitful scheming (Ephesians 4:11-15).

Other Church Leadership

What is true for the eldership is true for the larger leadership of the congregation also. The need to be alert to potential distortions of the truth is important in many congregational settings: a Sunday school class, a youth meeting, a small group Bible study, or any other place where the Word of God is being taught.

The need to hear the Word of God is important for all who are making ministry decisions in the various ministry centers of the congregation, since many of those decisions never come before the elder board.

We are reminded again of R. C. Sproul's statement that "every Christian is a theologian" — for better or for worse.

The Goal

The goal of this commentary is to equip the people of God who serve together in the Church of the Lutheran Brethren to better understand and articulate the teachings of the Bible as held by the Lutheran Brethren church family.

For many people, the noun *orthodoxy* is always preceded by the adjective *dead*. But the history of the Church, at its best, can be characterized by the term *live orthodoxy*.

God has revealed truth in his Word and we have 2,000 years of study and teaching to help us understand his Word. These 2,000 years of error and correction have shown us how we can err today and where we need to be careful. We have creeds that were written and taught and affirmed — truths for which people gave their lives. In a relativistic age, the church needs to be a people who believe and teach truth; church leaders need to be theologians "for better."

The Bible, including both Old and New Testaments as originally given, is the verbally and plenary inspired Word of God and is free from error in the whole and in the part, and is therefore the final authoritative guide for faith and conduct.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph A.

Glossary

Canon: A measuring stick. The canon question is, “Which books are the measure of the Church or the standard for the Church?” The canon is an authoritative list of books recognized as Holy Scripture.

Hermeneutics: The art or science of studying the Bible in order to gain understanding for one’s self and to help other people accurately understand what the Bible says.

Illumination: A God-given understanding of what has been revealed in Scripture.

Inerrant: Without mistakes; free from error.

Inspiration: God spoke through human beings to produce the Bible, using the human vocabulary, culture, and experience to speak enduring truth.

Revelation: The giving of information by God to humans — information that would not have been available unless it was made known to them.

Tradition

How do congregations make decisions? Most things churches do require no new decision; a decision was made long ago that is still in effect. There isn’t a business meeting every Thursday to decide if there will be services on Sunday. Christians have been gathering on Sunday since the Resurrection. It is a Christian tradition. Somewhere, someone made a decision and now the practice of the church, based on that tradition, continues.

Tradition is of many types:

1) Local tradition. The way we’ve always done things in our congregation. This aspect of tradition arises out of a shared sense of what is important and what is the proper decorum for carrying out the work of the church.

2) Synodical tradition, that gave birth to and continues to drive our national family of churches. “Who are the Lutheran Brethren, where did they come from and why do they exist?” The synodical tradition of the CLB is that we believe in a Lutheranism that emphasizes living the Christian truth that we profess and teach.

3) Evangelical tradition. We feel comfortable in churches, inter-denominational groups, Bible studies, clergy councils and para-church organizations that share many of our values. We resonate with those values when they are communicated through radio and television ministries and through the print media, and when we hear them expressed in the opinions of other Christians.

4) Catholic tradition. Here *catholic* means *of or relating to the ancient undivided Christian church*. So *catholic tradition* refers to practices of the church that go back to the apostles and are still accepted across denominational and geographic borders. One of these traditions is the practice of gathering for worship on Sunday as a weekly celebration of the Resurrection and of Pentecost.

5) Ethnic-national tradition. The CLB is descended from European Christianity, so many of our practices or traditions are not shared by Christians in Asia or Africa. For example, European Christianity celebrates the birth of Jesus on December 25th. Eastern Orthodox Christians are more likely to celebrate the birth of Jesus on January 6th.

Tradition should be appreciated. The things that people have believed and the way that people have done things in the past are legacies of faith left to us by those who have gone before us. We thank God for them.

We call it *traditionalism* when tradition has become little more than a habitual way of doing things. We don’t know why we do it that way; we just have always done it that way. We are not always so thankful for traditionalism.

We can never be free from tradition. It is in the air that we breathe and it sticks to us like our skin. Tradition shapes the language that we use, and our language shapes our tradition. But in every generation, tradition and the culture that goes with it must be measured against the Word of God, and the Word of God must stand as judge over tradition.

Authority

How do we make decisions in the church? Whatever we do as a church, we must do it in harmony with the Word of God. While we believe that believers in the past were faithful Bible students, we cannot just assume their infallibility and thereby neglect our own responsibility to study the Scriptures. We can appreciate “the way we’ve always believed.” But as church leaders today we too must study, teach and follow the Word of God as the measure and judge of our traditions and of us.

The CLB affirms and believes that the Bible is the Word of God and is the final authoritative guide for faith and conduct. Tradition is helpful, but the final authority over tradition is the Word of God. Human reason is necessary, but reason must be used as a servant of the Word of God, not as its master.

Our Statement of Faith lays out what we believe and teach. The first paragraph indicates how we came to these beliefs and on what our faith rests. All of the subsequent paragraphs are subject to this first paragraph and are in conformity with the first paragraph. The first paragraph is concerned with the issue of authority.

The Church’s source of authority is not a new issue; it was a major one at the time of the Protestant Reformation. In 1521 Martin Luther appeared in Worms, Germany before a gathering of the political leaders of Europe. He was called to answer for his writings. All of the important people of Germany were there, as was the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V of Spain. Charles was a descendant of Ferdinand and Isabella. At age 21, he ruled over more of Europe than anyone had since Charlemagne sat on the throne of the rebuilt Holy Roman Empire in 800 A.D.

The hall at Worms was packed; so crowded that the only one who could sit down was the Emperor. His Highness sat in his ermine robes, surrounded by all the trappings of majesty, dignity and power that one could imagine — and there stood the monk who had caused so much upheaval in the empire.

The emperor had summoned him [Luther] for two reasons, first, to determine whether he would acknowledge the books published under his name as his own, and after that whether Luther wished to confess his books or to retract anything in them (Brecht, 1985, vol. 1, p. 453).

One of the representatives of the Church said, “Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they all?” (Bainton, 1950, p. 185). Another person desired that the issue be settled quietly to avoid contention, controversy, schism, and insurrection. There was also the fear that unbelievers would be happy to hear Christians admit they had been wrong all these years.

A monk from the edge of the empire faced the most powerful political entity in Europe and representatives of the Holy Roman Church as well. It would have been very intimidating for any of us to stand before the emperor, but Luther was impressed in a different way. “What overpowered him was not so much that he stood in the presence of the emperor as this, that he *and the emperor alike* were called upon to answer before Almighty God” (Bainton, 1950, p. 182, italics added).

When asked to retract his teachings, Luther’s reply is famous, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen” (Brecht, 1985, vol. 1, p. 460).

Other printed versions add, “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise” (Bainton, 1950, p. 185).

The principle applied today

The issues we face today as congregational leaders and members must be handled in a similar way. As we read the story of Martin Luther, we get a sense of his deep respect for the history of the Church. We see his great familiarity with the teachings of the men who led and taught the church through the centuries. He referred to those men as the *fathers* of the church. Their teachings are part of our culture and heritage today also. They are important to us. We will benefit as we respect and understand this tradition. We have 2,000 years of study, of debate, of practice and experience to draw on as we formulate our positions. There were many wise saints who preceded us.

However, tradition can become so powerful that over time a church (or the Church) can drift from its moorings in the Bible. That was where Luther found the Church of his day. Respected men of God had made decisions, based on previous decisions, based on previous decisions, all of which had become the Church’s standard above the Word of God. The Church was testing itself against its own decisions instead of testing itself against the Word of God. Today, as with Luther in 1521, we must realize that we are ultimately accountable to God — not to political and religious powers — for what we believe and teach. We will be measured by the Word of God, not by the opinions and traditions of others.

If the church measures its present teaching by its previous teaching (tradition), it may easily err. If it measures itself by its canon, the Bible, it can more clearly see its error. If we say, “This is the way we’ve always done it,” we are measuring ourselves by ourselves or by other people. That is not a completely reliable standard. We always need to measure ourselves by the Word of God.

As our faith and practice pass from one generation to the next, the most important concept we need to pass along is an understanding that the Bible is God’s Word to us. We want the next generation to approach decision-making by searching the Scriptures to find answers. They will best be prepared for fruitful service as the people of God in their time and place when we instill in them the truth that the Bible is God’s Word and it will thoroughly equip them for every good work. If we instead only teach our children what we believe, we are sowing the seeds of error. This is not because we have believed the wrong things, but because we have taught a defective way of learning and knowing.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, there was a sense of passing the torch to the next generation of Christian leaders. In those two letters, Paul encouraged

Timothy to value tradition — remember what he was taught (2 Timothy 1:13, for example), and test tradition — study the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16-17, for example). Along with much teaching on leadership in the church, Paul exhorted Timothy to be doctrinally faithful in the face of persistent false teaching. The Word of God is the standard by which such faithfulness is tested.

Tradition can be good and useful, except when it is taken as a higher authority than the Bible. It is our tradition to pass the offering plate during the worship service. The Bible has much to say about giving our income back to God, but it doesn't say we must use offering plates. We wouldn't cancel our use of plates just because it is not commanded in the Bible. If another church does not use offering plates, we would not judge them to be outside of biblical authority and apostate.

The standard for faith

Today as in Luther's day there will be those who say, "This is the way we've always done it. Have we been wrong all these years and now you alone know what is right?" "Let us not be so uncompromising." "What will the unbelievers think?" "Were the great men of the past all wrong?"

People of the past did not always agree. Those things that we have "always believed" have probably not been held unanimously. In Luther's perspective, the Church fathers and councils had disagreed with each other and they had changed their minds over time. Therefore, one must take one's stand on the Word of God instead of on the decisions of Church fathers and councils. So when people say, "This is the way we've always done it," that may not be an accurate statement. There have probably been times when people before have done it differently. This means that even the current positions and dogmas need to be examined and re-examined in the light of Scripture to ensure that they are in accord with the Word of God and not the result of a parliamentary maneuver or an historical quirk.

Whenever there is disagreement (and even when there is agreement), the ultimate authority must be the authority of the Word of God. With all due respect for existing authority, as well as traditions and history, the final authority in all matters of faith and practice must be the Bible. God help us; here we stand. We cannot do otherwise.

The Bible Is the Word of God

Today some take the perspective that the New Testament is a creation of the early Church; that is, the early Church was responsible for the New Testament. This is the opposite of the historic Lutheran understanding that the Church is a creation of the Word and that the Church is responsible to the Word.

Consider the claims of the Bible and review its history. This will help us understand why it is the supreme authority for the Church.

The Protestant canon

When we use the words "Bible, including both Old and New Testaments," we are talking about the sixty-six books collected into one volume, which are accepted as canon in the Protestant church. These are the books that show us how we measure up — where we are in error and where we are standing on the truth.

The 39 books that we call the Old Testament were written before the time of Christ, collected as a volume, and translated from the original Hebrew and Aramaic languages into the Greek language by the second century BC. They were quoted as authoritative and accepted as the Word of God by Jesus and the apostles (Matthew 4:4; 5:18; 22:43-46; Acts 4:25-26; 2 Timothy 3:16). They were *the Scriptures*.

The 27 books that we call the New Testament had all been written by the end of the first century. Testimony about them indicates they were regarded as authoritative at that time. The defenders of the faith quoted them; heretics argued against them. Some New Testament books refer to other New Testament books in circulation as being "wisdom God gave" (2 Peter 3:15).

The ancient Christian Church (first century AD) knew which New Testament books were authoritative. The authors, men who had been with Jesus, were part of that Church. These are the same men who were told by Jesus that the Holy Spirit would remind them of all things and teach them all things. These men wrote with the conviction that the words they wrote were authoritative for the church.

The important thing to recognize is that these books were accepted as God's Word. That is why they were authoritative. The Church did not confer this authority; it merely recognized such authority existed and submitted to it, because the books were self-authenticating. The Church then prescribed two standards by which they would test any additional writings that were brought forward:

1) Can it be shown that the document was written or approved by the apostles? "The major test of the right of a book to be in the canon was whether it had the marks of apostolicity" (Cairns, 1967, p. 128).

2) Does the document preach Christ in accord with those Scriptures that are known to have apostolic authority?

Because of heretics and false teachers, it was repeatedly necessary for the leaders of the Church to declare publicly which books were authoritative so that people were not led astray. In doing so, these leaders were only declaring what was established long before and were not inventing or establishing anything new. The recently discovered Book of Judas, the Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel According to Thomas are books that were not accepted by the church as measuring up to these standards. They do not preach Christ and their authorship is questioned.

The Church continued to follow these two standards as the question of canon came up in discussion and debate. By 175 AD the New Testament canon was widely accepted, except for a few books whose authorship was in question. By the fourth century, it appears that the question was asked and addressed

with some finality. Athanasius, writing a letter in 367 AD, names those books accepted as canonical in the Eastern part of the Church. In 397 AD the Western Church listed the books that were accepted in the West. The Church did not see itself as making the decision about whether these books were the Word of God. The Church merely saw itself as publicly declaring what was accepted since the time of the apostles.

From 1545 to 1563 AD, as a reaction to the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church held a series of meetings to counter the effect of the Reformation. This process was called the Council of Trent. As part of that action, the Vulgate (a translation of the Bible from the Greek and Hebrew languages into Latin, done by Jerome in about 388 AD) was declared to be the final authority for the faithful. It included the canonical books as well as some books that had been treated as questionable, books that Protestants refer to as Apocrypha. According to Paul Little (Little, 1988, p. 82), Jerome himself had not considered these books to be canonical. Since he viewed them “as having ecclesiastical value only,” Jerome himself would have dissented from the action of the Council of Trent.

The authenticity of the Bible

The question might be stated, “Do we have God’s Word in reality, or only in theory?” The phrase “as originally given” accepts the fact that we do not have the physical, original manuscripts in the handwriting of the author available to us today. We accept the possibility of errors in copying the originals. However, we have so many copies to study and compare (many of which date back into antiquity, including a fragment of the Gospel of John dating back to 125 AD, only 25 years after the end of the apostolic age), that we can be confident we have a faithful reproduction of those original manuscripts. No doctrine of the Bible is dependent on an idiosyncrasy of any one copy. No doctrine of the Christian Church is dependent on a disputed reading. No other historical document is so well attested as the Bible.

God’s Word Written

God speaks

One definition of the Bible from an unknown source is, “God’s Word Written.” If God has spoken, his Word has an authority that outweighs any other authority in heaven or on earth. If God has spoken, his Word is final. It is binding for those of us who are his people, as individuals and as congregations. Whatever we do, we must listen to God. He is not silent.

People often spend time seeking God’s will; that is good. Often, however, they seek a word from God by looking and listening everywhere but where God does speak, the Bible. In all our searching, there is only one place where God speaks in such a way that we can show it to others, demand their ear, and say, “Thus saith the Lord.” Through the Bible, God speaks his Word to his creation.

In chapters one (especially) through three of Hebrews, the Psalms are quoted and the author records that “God says.” The words quoted were first

written 1,000 years before the book of Hebrews was written and yet the author of Hebrews writes “God says” as though God were speaking in the present tense through words written in the past.

God speaks truthfully

Verbally inspired means that each word is inspired by God. *Plenarily* inspired means that the whole product is inspired by God. “Free from error in the whole and in the part” means that since the product in its parts and in its whole is from God (who is Truth), it is free from error — without mistakes. A word that expresses all these realities is *inerrancy*.

We understand this to mean that the Bible is infallible in what it asserts. This is not the same as saying that we infallibly know what the Bible asserts. It is possible for us to misunderstand and misinterpret the Bible. When this happens, it is not an error of the Scriptures but an error of interpretation. Because of our fallen human nature, our ability to perceive and understand truth is damaged. The problem is not in God’s revelation; it is in our fallenness.

We need to have the confidence that the Bible is true and the humility to recognize we might be wrong. But we will continue to read and hear and analyze and interpret Scripture, because we believe that the Bible is true.

It is also helpful to remember that we bring our presuppositions and biases to our interpretation of Scripture. We may sometimes see what we expect to see and miss what is really there. We hear what we expect to hear and often miss what was actually said. We read the Bible through presuppositional “glasses.” The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, wrote the wisdom literature writers. Our attitude toward God and his gifts will affect the way we understand God’s Word.

The words are God’s and the words are human. The human writers were conscious and intelligent instruments through whom God gave his Word to the world. Luke’s introduction to his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) describes his approach. He researched and carefully compiled information as he told the story of the life of Christ. Luke’s human intelligence and method were used by God and inspired by the Holy Spirit to produce what is God’s Word. You can trust what you are told by God in the Bible. It is true. God, who is truth, breathed those words.

God Speaks With Authority

Normative authority (canon)

In 2 Timothy 3:1-4:5, the heart of a letter about ministry in the Church, the Apostle Paul warns Timothy about those who will oppose the truth. He writes of the value of the Scriptures to teach and prepare for ministry. He instructs Timothy to preach and teach the Word and to resist those who turn aside from the truth. While the entire letter addresses issues of Church leadership and ministry, this center section focuses attention on the important work of the ministry of the Word. Paul urges Timothy to remember that the inspired Word of God sets the standard for what is to be believed and how the work of the

Church is to be done. The Scriptures are the canon, a measuring stick to assess the life and teaching of the Church.

The Bible is the place where God reveals himself. The Scriptures have been passed on to us by the prophets, evangelists, and apostles for our benefit, so that we might know God, his work, his will, his ways. We can speculate about what God is like and we can create in our minds a god that we want, but the Scriptures are God's self-revelation to us of who he is and what he is like. To accept God's self-revelation is not to place him in a box or to limit him; it is to accept God's own testimony about himself rather than substituting our testimony for his. For example, it was God's decision to choose his own name, the name by which he would be known — Father. While the Bible does use some maternal qualities to describe God, God chose the name, Father. In order to understand God by this self-designation, we have to understand what the name Father meant to the first audience of the Bible. We do not impose our own opinions about what that title means. To refuse to let God choose his own name in self-revelation is to insist on describing God in terms other than the ones that he has chosen for himself.

Causative authority

Genesis 1:3, "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." By the power of his Word, God brings light out of darkness.

Psalm 33:6, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth."

Ezekiel 37:1-14, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!" Read this chapter and see how God gives life to the dead — by the preaching of the Word of God.

John 11:43, "Lazarus, come out!" By the power of his command, God in Christ Jesus brings life out of death.

Hebrews 1:3b, "...sustaining all things by his powerful word." By the sheer power of his Word, he keeps all things in order and operation.

God's power is at work in his Word. His Word is powerful to create and sustain. "God calls things that are not as though they were" and makes childless Abram become Abraham — father of a great nation. God calls the wicked righteous and for Jesus' sake justifies sinners (see Romans 4).

God has chosen to accomplish his goals in the world through the power of his Word. As the Word of God is read, heard, sung and preached, the Spirit of God is working through that Word. If we depart from that Word, whether in our corporate worship and evangelism or in our personal devotional lives, we are neglecting the clear promise and power of God.

The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). The power to create and sustain faith resides in the Word and promise of God. God's acting in our age takes place in and through his holy Word, the Bible. As he spoke light and creation into existence long ago, he speaks light and life today.

The Bible Is the Guide for Faith

The Word of God as the source of faith

We read in 2 Timothy 3:15, "...from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

"The final authoritative guide for faith" can be understood in two ways: The Word of God is the means by which we come to faith; and the Word of God is what we believe.

Where does faith come from? Paul writes, "By grace you are saved through faith, and this is not of yourselves, it is a gift from God" (Ephesians 2:8). What is the gift? *It* and *this* are the words that refer to the gift. Grammatically, they look back to the word *faith*. This would mean that the whole package of salvation by grace is the gift referred to in this sentence. Considering that grace means something undeserved, to say that it is a gift may seem redundant. But even then faith is one of the parts of the gift package.

Peter writes that a person is born again of an imperishable seed, which is the Word of God preached (1 Peter 1:23-25). James writes that God chose to give us birth through the Word of truth (James 1:18).

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, we read that God chose to save the Thessalonians through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth. He called them through the Gospel.

Faith comes from God the Holy Spirit, speaking to us through his inspired Word — a Word that is as good and dependable as the one who spoke it. It is powerful enough to give new life to a dead soul.

God does not believe for us. The faith we exercise is our faith, but it is created by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of the Gospel. Faith is always created by the object of faith. God must convince us he is trustworthy if we are going to trust him. By his Spirit through the Word of the Gospel, God works faith in us. There is a difference between faith and gullibility.

Pray for those who are unsaved. But remember that it is by hearing the Word of Christ that they will believe and be saved. So pray that someone will speak to them in a way that will cause them to hear and believe.

The Word of God as the content of faith

The Word of God is the reason that we believe; it is also what we believe. Walter Koehler writes, "No one can tell us what God wants us to believe... but God Himself" (Koehler, 1971, p. 1).

Some issues are at the heart of what we believe and are foundational to saving faith. We believe that the central doctrine of the Bible is justification by faith. We might say, "If you don't get this, you don't get the Bible."

"Justification is the gracious act of God by which he, for Christ's sake, acquits me (declares me not guilty), a repentant and believing sinner, of my sin and guilt, credits me with Christ's righteousness, and looks upon me, in Christ, as though I had never sinned" (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 79). Justification is foundational to our assurance of salvation. It gives us confidence that we are in

a right standing before God.

The Bible supports the doctrine of justification by faith with other teachings that are almost essential to a proper understanding of this central doctrine. These are of such importance that, if they are not known, or if they are denied, assurance for saving faith is diminished. This does not mean that one must master these truths in order to be saved; children can be saved and they do not have this intellectual knowledge. But, to the degree that one is unfamiliar with the following teachings, one's faith is lacking assurance, confidence, or proper foundation.

- 1) The inspiration and authority of the Scriptures is essential because the sinner needs to know who it is that says sinners are justified by grace through faith. If the Bible is God's Word to us, then it is God who says we are now in a right standing with Him and we come to him confidently. If the Bible is not God's Word but only some human word about God, then we may lack confidence.
- 2) A biblical understanding of sin and its consequences are important to us because we are reminded of the gravity of our problem and realize the necessity of a salvation that is outside of us. An awareness of our sin tells us that we really do have a problem before God — a problem in our relationship with him. The gravity of our sin prevents us from thinking that we can save ourselves.
- 3) The doctrines about the person of Jesus teach us who it is that saves us. We recognize how great a Savior we have. If Jesus saves us, we are authentically, actually saved — because he is God in the flesh.
- 4) The substitutionary atonement teaches us what Jesus did in order to save us. Because he took the responsibility to die in our place, we know that our sins have been condemned and dealt with once and for all. Because he paid the full penalty for our sin, there is nothing and no one that can condemn us — not the world, not the devil, not even we ourselves. We have assurance before God because Jesus has effectively dealt with the sin that would have prevented us from being safe in the presence of God.
- 5) The resurrection of Christ assures us that Jesus lives, sin and death have been defeated, and that we too will rise some day. The Apostle Paul wrote that if Christ was not raised, we are still in our sins and our faith is worthless. But Christ has indeed been raised (1 Corinthians 15).

There are other teachings that are also foundational to faith, but are less primary. These teachings strengthen and assure us in our faith. Our confidence is diminished if we do not know them.

Teaching about the means of grace — Word and Sacraments — is foundational. The Bible tells us that God is present in his Word to deliver his gifts, to enlighten our minds, to work faith and hope. Faith is built on these truths and strengthened by these truths, so they are fundamental, foundational teachings. When the Apostle Paul talked about Christians, he talked about them as those who had been baptized. He called their attention to a visible, tangible event as evidence that they were new creatures in Christ (Romans 6). That is

important for our assurance; God gives the blessings and benefits of Jesus' work to us through the Word and Sacraments, specifically, baptism and the Lord's Supper (see Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 127f).

The Bible's teaching about the means of grace helps us understand how God delivers to people what Christ accomplished for them. This instructs our mission as the church also. God desires our salvation and delivers it to us without waiting for us to ask for it, to earn or deserve it, or even to be able to understand it. This is important for our assurance.

Other teachings are given to us to encourage us in our walk with God. They may not be foundational to faith but are supportive of our life in Christ. This does not mean that there are things in the Bible that are useless or pointless. The Bible says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and useful" and "teaching them to obey all things I have commanded" (2 Timothy 3:16; Matthew 28:20).

The Word of God as the Word about Christ

In John 5:31-47, Jesus declares to the skeptics that there is ample testimony about him if they are open to hear it. John the Baptist testified of Jesus; the miracles Jesus did testified; the Father testified; the Scriptures testify. In John 5:39 Jesus says, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me." He goes on to say that Moses, whom they revere so highly, wrote of Jesus. Jesus is the subject of the Bible.

The Pharisees missed the point. It could happen to us as well. Bernard Ramm writes:

The prostitution of the Bible from a *means* to an end is an ever imminent danger for those little groups who study the Bible for no other reason than love to study the Bible. Such groups frequently fall prey to such spiritual maladies as Pharisaism, spiritual pride, and popishness in interpretation (Ramm, 1970, p. 52, emphasis in original).

We need to study the Bible to hear God speak, to meet God, to be drawn to Christ, to be corrected, to be instructed, to be nourished in faith. If we study the Bible only to become more biblically literate, we miss the point.

"These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). While this statement applies directly to John's Gospel, it is also true of the whole Bible. The point of the Bible is to tell of the salvation God prepared and delivered in Christ so that people may believe and be saved.

Across 1500 years of writing, through many different authors and styles of literature, there is unity of theme and singularity of source. It is the Word of the eternal God concerning the eternal Son, Jesus Christ.

The Word of God as the story of salvation

The Bible is the story of God's relationship with his creation. It began with God's act of creating everything and declaring everything to be good. The second act was the rebellion of humans against God. That act began with doubt of God's Word and ended in the condemnation of humanity and the cursing

of creation. The third act and major emphasis of the story is God's work to restore all of creation. God first gave the promise of a savior in the Garden of Eden, after the rebellion, but before the expulsion (Genesis 3:15). The promise was continued to Abraham, David, Isaiah, and Mary. The promise was fulfilled in Jesus, who completed all things so that creation could be reconciled to its creator. The fourth act in the narrative is the post-Pentecost work of the Church to deliver the news of reconciliation to the ends of the earth. The story will conclude when the new creation is completed.

The Bible is not primarily an encyclopedia of facts; it is the story of God's salvation — promised, delivered, and proclaimed.

Qualifiers

Two things that must be said very carefully: 1) the Bible is not always easy to understand, and 2) the Bible is not an encyclopedia or a book of principles and blueprints that make up a "how-to" for life.

Peter, in 2 Peter 3:16, remarks that Paul writes things that are hard to understand and which people distort to their own destruction. Fair warning is given. Peter wrote to people who were familiar with the original language and the original context socially and culturally. It was easier for them than it is for us to understand what Paul wrote. The Holy Spirit works through these words, however, and gives light and understanding — which wouldn't be necessary if the Bible were easy to understand. Read and study thoughtfully. The *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* addresses this question with three important statements (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 10):

"The Bible is sometimes hard to understand, but it is clear enough to those who use it correctly."

To use the Bible correctly, "I should regularly read and hear it thoughtfully, asking the Holy Spirit to instruct me so that I can believe it and live according to its teaching."

"I should pray for help in understanding the Bible because my mind is darkened by sin, and I cannot understand it by myself."

The second concern is that we may reduce the Bible to an encyclopedia or some book of great wisdom. The modern mind respects wisdom, so if we say that the Bible is a book of knowledge and wisdom, we feel that we are being respectful of the Bible. The problem is that this somewhat misses the point. The point of the Bible is Jesus. It is the story of what Jesus has done for us so that we can come to God through him, be his people and follow him, and enjoy his kingdom forever. There are certainly many wise sayings; there are many principles. But those things are secondary to telling the story of Jesus and if we are looking for a manual of some kind, we will be in danger of missing the point.

The Bible centers on Jesus as the one who gives life and sustains life. The Bible centers on Jesus as the creator of life and redeemer of life. The Bible tells us that life is in Christ and this life is a grace life.

The Bible Is the Guide for Conduct

For congregations

The Bible is not only the source of faith, but also the authority for practice in the Church. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Bible not only instructs the Church about what to do but also about how to do it. Scripture is useful, practical, valuable, and profitable for every pastoral work, to thoroughly equip the pastoral ministry of the Church. The Matthean version of the Great Commission not only tells the Church what to do in its missional life — make disciples — but also how to do it, by going, baptizing, and teaching (Matthew 28:19-20).

The local congregation is an assembly of believers. They became such through the regenerating power of the Word of God (1 Peter 1:23). This same Word of God also is the governing Word for the life of this assembly. We are tempted to substitute or supplement something else (tradition, opinion, feelings, preferences, etc.) for the Word of God. When we are facing this temptation, the warning of Jesus in Matthew 15:8-9 is instructive, "These people... worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." Beware of the tendency to insert our opinions or the opinions of other respected people in place of God's Word. Notice that Jesus is quoting from Isaiah, so the problem was not unique to the time of Christ. Notice also that this referred to their practices in daily living and not just to matters of faith and liturgy. Jesus addressed the way in which they misused the Word of God in the care of their parents and said, "You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:6).

During times of change, especially during times of leadership transition, the Word of God is even more important, if that is possible. Notice that after Moses had given his farewell address to the Israelites and passed the leadership of the nation to Joshua, God came to Joshua and said:

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (Joshua 1:7-8).

The "Book of the Law" refers to the law given to the people through Moses, which we now have as the first five books of the Old Testament, especially the book of Deuteronomy.

When the Apostle Paul passed the torch to Timothy in the New Testament, he pointed Timothy to the Scriptures that were able to equip him for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). During times of transition in a congregation, practices and ideas may be questioned. It is important in those times to make special effort to look at the Bible carefully and see how it speaks to the pastoral and missional situations of the Church.

For individuals

In coming to grips with the issues we as congregational leaders face today, there are those who will seek what is politically correct, what is modern, what is logical, what seems best, what “works.” Some will say, “God told me,” while others will appeal to human reason. All of these must be judged by Scripture. The issue is not whether something seems good or not, the issue is whether it is scriptural. Logic and reason are useful when they are placed in service of the Word of God, to understand the Word. When logic and reason stand in judgment on the Word of God, they are being used wrongly. The Word of God will never be illogical, but it will at times go beyond what logic and reason can grasp.

The Word of God speaks to individuals as well as to congregations. The Word judges our personal lives, too. When we are examining ourselves, we need to do so in light of the Scriptures, not in the light of television or the neighbor’s morality.

In our teaching, in our practice, in our personal lives, we stand before God. We are responsible for the truth he has revealed in the Bible, regardless of who we are — emperor, monk, pastor, elder, parishioner.

In the Church of Jesus Christ, we must make decisions based on the Bible, not on what others decide. You may find yourself standing like Luther, alone, ostracized, perhaps even condemned by a church. But you also must stand on the Word of God, God help you.

Study Questions

- 1) Since God is present in his Word, how should that affect planning for church services? How much Bible reading should be planned? What would be an appropriate attitude during the readings?
- 2) Since the Bible is the story of Christ, does that affect the way in which the stories of the Bible are interpreted? What difference would it make if the story of Joseph in prison were part of the story of Jesus, as compared to simply being a morality tale?
- 3) Since the Bible has causative authority, that is, God works through his Word (see section above on causative authority), how should that affect the programming of your church, if at all?
- 4) Are there any events in the life of your church that have turned the means into an end, as Ramm warns?
- 5) Can you think of some things that are done in church that are done just because that’s the way they have always been done? Is there still good reason to do them? Do they still serve the biblical purpose?
- 6) Are there some things that are done in church just because some respected leader says they should be done? It can be helpful to consult experts such as biblical scholar Richard Lenski, family expert James Dobson, or mega-church leader Bill Hybels. However, what is the biblical authority?

CHAPTER 2: THE TRINITY

There is one God eternally existent in three distinct persons in one divine essence, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph B.

Glossary

Docetism: An early heresy that taught that Jesus only seemed to be human.

Gnosticism: An early heresy that denied the full deity of Jesus, denied the full humanity of Jesus, and taught that special knowledge was what saved a person. This heresy separated matter and spirit, teaching that all matter was evil and only spirit could be good. The Almighty could not have created matter (since matter is evil) or he would not be good. Therefore there must have been many lesser gods who did the creation work.

Marcion: An early Gnostic who hated the God of the Old Testament and cut any reference to him out of the Marcion canon. (Marcion's canon was a list of books that he thought were the Word of God, including one Gospel and most of the letters of Paul, but no Old Testament books at all.)

Modalism: The concept of one God who appears in three different forms or modes.

Monarchianism: The concept of one ruler.

Montanus: An early church leader who believed in direct revelation and considered his own writings to be equal in authority to those of the Apostles.

Monotheism: The belief that there is only one God.

Polytheism: The belief that there are many gods.

Tritheism: The belief that there are three gods.

Introduction

The Arian controversy

In 318 or 319 [AD], Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, discussed with his presbyters "The Unity of the Trinity" (elders). One of the presbyters, Arius, an ascetic scholar and popular preacher, attacked the sermon because he believed that it failed to uphold a distinction among the persons in the Godhead. In his desire to avoid a polytheistic conception of God, Arius took a position that did injustice to the true deity of Christ (Cairns, 1967, p. 142).

The problem was that in his desire to preserve the independent personality of Christ and at the same time preserve monotheistic Christianity, Arius made Christ something less than God. In so doing, he actually challenged Christ's ability to save.

Athanasius, the archdeacon of Alexandria, realized that if Christ were less than fully God, he could not be our savior. Only God could save fallen humanity.

The controversy divided the Church into three groups: 1) those who were absolutely opposed to Arius, Athanasius being the leader of this group, 2) those who were unequivocal supporters of Arius, and 3) those who were willing to compromise.

The controversy not only threatened the unity of the Church, but also the unity of the empire. Emperor Constantine, in an effort to settle the issue, convened a council of bishops.

It hadn't been that long since the emperor of Rome had been the chief adversary of Christianity. The emperor had been viewed as a god. When Christians refused to worship him, they were judged as impious criminals. Much of the persecution of the early Church was over this issue. But now the emperor invited the leading churchmen to Nicaea "to settle a theological problem," he said. Was it a trap? Should they go? The irony was great. The one who was formerly honored with the words "Caesar is Lord" was now inviting those who said, "No, Jesus is Lord," to settle the issue of whether or not Jesus was truly Lord. Was he God, or something else — less than God, yet greater than man?

This was quite a scene in Nicaea, 325 AD. Three hundred bishops were present at the invitation of the emperor, at the emperor's expense, as the emperor's allies. Some of these bishops still had physical scars [from the persecutions]. "One pastor from Egypt was missing an eye; another was crippled in both hands as a result of red-hot irons." But this was different. The persecuted were now the advisors of the emperor [gathered to settle a theological issue]" (Shelley, 1990, p. 10).

Out of this council came the framework for the Nicene Creed, which affirmed the full deity of Christ as biblical doctrine. Full deity. Jesus is as much God as the Father is God. The words "Jesus is Lord" meant what they expressed. Jesus is one with the one who is addressed as Lord in the Old Testament.

This truth, when challenged, was reaffirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD and then reaffirmed (and expanded) in 451 AD at the Council of Chalcedon.

Arianism originated within the catholic church, among people who wanted to be true to their apostolic heritage. They did not want to discard large parts of it, like Marcion, nor to supplement it with private revelations, like Montanus. Nevertheless, Arianism came to be perceived as one of the most dangerous and pernicious of errors. For a time, however, it was very successful — so successful that its adherents were elevated to the most important bishoprics and it controlled the major part of the church, at least in the [eastern end of the Mediterranean area]” (Brown, 1984, p. 105).

We have a difficult time trying to explain the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Whenever we try, we risk error. Sometimes, we wonder why it is so important. In the history of the Church, some thought it worth fighting and dying for, since they believed our eternal salvation depended on it.

When everything goes smoothly, when nothing is challenged, hard study is rarely done. When there is controversy and adversity, people are forced to do the hard work of thinking, studying, and writing. In his book *Heresies*, Harold Brown talks about the ways in which wrong doctrines forced people to examine the truth and state it clearly. In this way, error gives us truth.

The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental for the Christian faith... All of the basic Christian convictions about the work of Christ presuppose that he is a distinct Person who can enter into a relationship with the Father. At the same time, Christ must have the attributes of deity with all its power in order to accomplish the gigantic task of reconciliation and redemption (Brown, 1984, p. 127).

The Arian controversy “did not, of course, create orthodox faith, for that really existed in a more or less clearly defined form from the days of the Apostles. What it did was give the church the first standard by which orthodoxy could be reliably measured” (Brown, 1984, p. 106).

Modern Arians

Arianism did not die in the fourth century. Today, there are still groups and cults that deny that Jesus Christ is the incarnate, unique, eternal Son of God. They would attribute to him some lesser status, perhaps similar to God, but not God. These modern Arians, like their fathers, quote proof texts. However, their strength is not in direct Bible study, but rather in philosophical reflection and discussion. In varying degrees, some modern liberals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and New England Unitarians are Arianistic. Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, listed Arius as one of the six great leaders in the history of Christianity. Unitarians trace their theological heritage back to Arius.

Early heresies (Docetism, for example) denied Jesus’ humanity; Arians denied his essential deity. We believe that “It was necessary for our Savior to be true man in order that He might fulfill the law for us, and suffer and die in our place” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 62). Furthermore, we believe that “It was necessary for our Savior to be true God so that His blood might have unlimited power to pay for the sins of all people” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 63).

If Jesus Christ is not God, but one of God’s creatures, then he cannot be our savior. It is because Jesus is God that he is able to save us. Our sin problem was so serious that only God could rescue us from it. And if God in Jesus Christ has in fact rescued us, who can undo or negate that rescue? “If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31b)”

The Holy Trinity

One God eternally existent

When we say *God* we are using a fairly generic term that can be a name or an idea. Everyone has a god — something that they fear, love, and trust more than anything else. For some that deity is pleasure, for others it is the empty space of the universe, while for others it may be their own rational abilities. In the self-help community, there is the phrase “god as you understand him,” that allows anyone to pick or choose what they believe in and still be accepted. In the Church, we have a context; we all know whom we are talking about when we speak of God. But in the larger culture and when we are addressing a more pluralistic audience, we need to be alert to the potential ambiguity.

Our God has a name — several actually. He has identified himself for us by these names. Some examples are: Yahweh (from the Hebrew for *I am*, translated *Lord* in our versions); the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Following are some biblical affirmations of the one-ness of God:

Deuteronomy 6:4 asserts, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

1 Corinthians 8:4b, “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.”

Isaiah 44:6 says, “This is what the Lord says — Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” The rest of Isaiah 44 and 45 speaks emphatically that there is no other God, there is no one like him, and there is no other Rock. God through Isaiah speaks of the foolishness of idol worship in which men make their gods. Man-made idols are compared to the God who made man, created the universe, and manages history.

From these passages, God tells us that he alone is God; he is one. He is almighty and there can only be one Almighty. If he saves, no one can destroy; if he condemns, no one can rescue (Romans 8:31; Job 10:7). If there is only one God, then there is only salvation in him. If there is only one God, then he is the one to whom all mankind must answer. If there is only one God, then what he says must be understood in absolute terms.

False ideas about God include *atheism*, the belief that there is no god; *polytheism*, the belief that there are many gods; *pantheism*, the belief that everything is god and god is everything; and *naturalism (materialism)*, the

belief that nature or matter is god.

One way to describe God is to highlight what he is not. He is immortal (not mortal), invisible (not visible), immutable (not changeable). But what has God made known about himself?

Three distinct persons

The doctrine of God that Christians are most noted for is the doctrine of the Tri-unity of God — or Trinity. Christians believe that there is one God and there are three persons — each of whom is God. There are not three gods, but one. Christians are *monotheists*, but differ from other monotheistic religions such as Judaism or Islam. Jews and Muslims believe in one God, but not in the three persons of the Trinity.

According to the Scriptures, this one God has revealed himself in three distinct persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each is true God, each is equal to the others, each is eternal, each is to be worshipped; yet there are not three gods, but only one God. The word Trinity itself is not in the Bible; it is a word that was probably first used by Tertullian (a third century theologian) to describe a truth that is taught in the Bible (Wisløff, 1983, p. 29).

Each person in the Holy Trinity is entire God. The unity is not divided into three parts like an egg so that each person is one-third god. Each person is God with all the attributes of God, but there are not three gods; there is one God. There is one divine essence and three ‘I’s. “The word ‘person’ is to be understood as the Fathers employed the term in this connection, not as a part or a property of another but as that which exists of itself” (Tappert, 1959, p. 28) and relates in a person-to-person way. Each person is always that person and is not to be confused with another person. The Father is always the Father, the Son is always the Son, the Spirit is always the Spirit. But God is not divided.

Person is different from *power*. Some believe that there is one God who has three different ways of acting and manifesting himself. They might use the analogy of water and steam and ice to describe the Trinity, three different forms of one substance. This error is sometimes called “Modalistic Monarchianism” because it claims that one god appears in three different disguises or modes. Another variation of this error suggests that the one God had several lesser deities under him, including the Word and the Spirit. They were subordinate and less pure. Still another variation presents Jesus as a good man to whom God gave special powers and whom God adopted at Jesus’ baptism (this is sometimes called Dynamic Monarchianism). The opposite error to the different kinds of Monarchianism is Tritheism (three gods). The Jehovah’s Witnesses, attempting to discredit the doctrine of the Trinity, describe it as three gods in one person.

Human attempts to make the doctrine of the Trinity understandable also increase the likelihood of error. Most often, the error will either be Tritheism (three gods, a kind of polytheism) or some form of Unitarianism (three faces of one person, a kind of Modalistic Monarchianism).

On the basis of Scripture, we think of the three persons as: the Father, who is neither begotten nor sent, but eternally begets the Son and sends the Spirit; the Son, who is begotten from eternity by the Father, of the same essence as the

Father and who with the Father sends forth the Spirit; and the Spirit, who is of the same essence as the Father and the Son and who from eternity proceeds from Father and Son and is sent forth by Father and Son. These acts are called the *personal acts* or the *inward operations* of the Trinity. They attempt to describe, using biblical terms, the distinctions within the Trinity that address how the three persons relate to each other.

Around the end of the first millennium of the Church, there was a split between the eastern and the western churches over the issue of whether the Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son, or from the Father only. On the basis of John 16:7 and other texts, the western church believed that the Spirit proceeded from Father and Son.

The *outward operations* of the Trinity — works in which all three persons are involved together — are the acts of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Scripture generally ascribes each act to one of the persons over the other (creation to the Father; redemption to the Son; sanctification to the Spirit), but each is involved in all the outward operations. We see that the different acts of God are attributed to different persons of the Trinity in different places in the Bible. For example, creation is attributed to the Father in Psalm 102:25, to the Son in Colossians 1:16, and to the Holy Spirit in Job 26:13.

An important exception to this is the unique way in which the Trinity worked out our salvation. Christ was sent by the Father and anointed by the Spirit. There was eternal concurrence within the Trinity on the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection, but the work of redemption is the work of Christ alone. Nowhere does the Bible say that the Father or the Spirit became incarnate, suffered, died, or rose from the dead. Although we talk about redemption as unique in the acts of the Trinity in that Christ performed that work alone, we should never think that God the Son acted in opposition to Father and Spirit or without the full concurrence of Father and Spirit in accomplishing our redemption.

One divine essence

There are three persons who are distinctly separate, yet who are called God. Three divine persons who have one and the same essence. This one, same divine essence with all the divine attributes belongs to each of the persons.

We affirm that there are three persons, three rational individuals, yet one divine essence. This one divine essence is God’s nature, shared by each person in the Holy Trinity. When we speak of the first, second, and third persons of the Trinity, we are not ascribing superiority or inferiority to any of the persons. They are equal in majesty and rank, of the same essence. This essence is the divine nature itself, and it is one and is common to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the Trinity.

As a practical observation, persons relate to one another. The first, second, and third persons of the Godhead have related in love throughout eternity. They have been coeternal, and coequal throughout eternity. Yet we see that the second and third persons have been subordinate to the first, without being any less God and without surrendering majesty and glory. We also see a perfect harmony of will in the three persons. The will of the Father is that people should honor the

Son. The work of the Spirit is to direct people to the Son. When all things are completed, the Son will hand the kingdom over to the Father. The incarnate Son prayed to his Father, “Yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42b).

The close relationship between Father and Son is reflected in John 13:31-32 as the Son is glorified in the Father and the Father is glorified in the Son. It is also seen in John 14:6-14. The Son is the only way to the Father, the Son is the revelation of the Father, and the Son brings glory to the Father as the disciples ask the Father in the name of the Son. At the request of the Son, the Father will send the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-18) — called both Counselor and Comforter — to teach us and remind us of Jesus (John 14:26; 15:26). The Son is going to the Father and sending the Holy Spirit to convict the world, to guide the disciples into truth and to bring glory to the Son (John 16:7-15).

Christians who desire to image God in the world should take this reality into consideration. The Trinity’s way of relating should be reflected in the life of the church as it lives in mutual submission and harmony. Jesus prayed that the Church would be one “as we are one” meaning that the life of the church together would reflect the loving relational life of the Trinity (John 17:20-23). It should be reflected in our other relationships as well — marriage, for example. Service and submission do not automatically imply subservience. In the relational picture of the Trinity, we see a way of relating that allows people to be equals, working together toward common goals. Different persons take leadership in different tasks, and different persons take less visible roles at different times without relinquishing equality or personal place.

Characteristics of the Trinity

The Bible teaches us what God is like:

God is God. He is an eternal spirit who is loving, all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present, wise, good, merciful, holy, true, and just. Although God has revealed Himself to us in various ways, no human mind can fully understand Him (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 50).

God the Holy Trinity is both transcendent and immanent. That God is transcendent means he is above and beyond all things. At the end of the universe (which is supposedly expanding all the time), God is there. Before time began, God is there. Imagine the greatest power, God is more powerful. The pantheist, the naturalist, and others make God part of the world in the trees, the sun, or in human beings, for example. Others try to make God comprehensible to human thinking. But he is transcendent beyond our world, beyond our experience, beyond our imagination.

But God is also immanent. He is not detached, removed, or absent. He is present, involved, and active in our world. The classic expression of this is the incarnation of God the Son, living in the flesh among us to die for our sins and still present today by his Spirit to seek and save those who are lost. This is the God of the Scriptures.

The biblical teaching about God the Holy Trinity affirms to us that it was God who loved us and became human. It was not a lesser deity, not some

different being, but the eternal, immortal, almighty, holy, holy, holy God who for us and for our salvation became human in Jesus of Nazareth.

Biblical Perspectives

John 1

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1-2).

Paraphrased: “When the beginning happened, the Word was already present and existing. And the Word was standing face to face with God as a person distinct from and equal to God — and the Word *was* God (not ‘God was the Word,’ but ‘the Word was God’). To reiterate, the Word was standing face to face with God when the beginning began.”

“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men” (John 1:3-4).

Paraphrased: “By means of the Word, all things came into being; apart from the Word, nothing came into being that has come into being. In fact, life itself was existing in him, the Word is the source of life, and life is embodied in the Word.”

John 1:6-8 states that John the Baptist came to introduce the Word to people. John’s testimony is that the Word would come after him, but that the Word pre-existed John.

John 1:9-13 summarizes the reception given to the Word. Some received him; many did not.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14a).

Paraphrased, “The always existing Word became something he previously was not — flesh, without ceasing to be what he always was — God, and then came to live and work and relate to us as a human person.”

John writes this book so that people will believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). In the introduction to the book, he has expressed in emphatic language that Jesus, identified as “the Word,” is eternal deity, one with God and also distinct from God the Father. Compare this to Paul’s statement about the incarnation in Philippians 2:5-11.

John 14-16

In Chapters 14-16 of his Gospel, John recorded the events of Jesus’ last night with his disciples before the crucifixion. Historically, the two main sticking points in the doctrine of the Trinity have centered on the deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit. This section in John addresses those two issues.

Jesus says “Trust in God, trust also in me” (14:1). Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us” (14:8). Jesus responded by saying, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). The relationship between God the Father and God the Son was so complete, the essential correspondence so exact that seeing one would be the same as seeing the other. God the personal

Father could be seen in God the personal Son. They are the same — not the same person — but the same in the sense of two persons who are the same as each other. People use the word *essence* to talk about this sameness. While Father and Son are two distinct persons, they are of one essence.

There is one divine essence and three divine persons. In this teaching section Jesus has emphasized the exactness of essence between the Father and himself, the Son. He goes on to say that he is going to the Father (14:12) and will bring glory to the Father (14:13) through answered prayer.

In this, his final teaching session with the disciples, Jesus also discusses the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In John 14:16, Jesus says, “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth.” “Another” means another of the same kind, not a different kind. In Jesus’ absence, the presence of God will be realized by another who is like Jesus, the Spirit of truth. “Another” signifies distinction and identity.

There is one divine essence and three divine persons. “I (Jesus) will ask the Father, and he will give you [the Holy Spirit]” (14:16). The Spirit will “teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (14:26). We see personal attributes and equality of persons — essential equality. Jesus is saying, “If you have seen me you have seen the Father, and the Spirit is like me.”

We gain insight into the Holy Trinity in this passage. As Jesus prepares the disciples for his departure (exaltation, John 12:23-32), he calls on his disciples to trust God. God the Father is revealed by God the Son (14:9), glorifies the Father (14:13), and is glorified by God the Holy Spirit (16:14). The issue is, “Trust in God” (14:1). The Father is seen in the Son; the Spirit teaches all things, testifies of Jesus, takes of the things of Jesus and makes them known. The disciples’ response is, “This makes us believe.” Jesus says, “You believe at last” (16:30-31).

Ephesians 1

The book of Ephesians is the most general of the letters of Paul. Without addressing a specific problem in the church, Paul writes what may have been a kind of circular letter. He begins with a doxology, a hymn of praise. Paul wrote it as one long sentence. Our translators have broken it into sentences for our benefit and understanding, but the phrase “to the praise of his glory” shapes the paragraph and is an appropriate motif for the Christian Church today. R.C.H. Lenski’s commentary on Ephesians develops this understanding of Ephesians 1:3-14 (Lenski, 1961, pp. 349-387). Notice that Paul leads the Church in praise to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Praise to God the Father. (Ephesians 1:3-6)

He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world.

He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.

To the praise of his glorious grace.

Praise to God the Son. (Ephesians 1:7-12)

In him we have redemption.

In him all things in heaven and earth are being brought together.

For the praise of his glory.

Praise to God the Spirit. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Who includes us in Christ through the Gospel.

Who marks us as belonging to God.

To the praise of his glory.

Study Questions

- 1) How do the external *outward operations* working style of the three persons of the Trinity give a good example of how teams can work together in ministry?
- 2) How do the personal acts or *internal operations* of the Trinity instruct us in our own relationships?
- 3) How does the Trinity model the concepts of *separate but equal* and *unity in diversity* for human social structures like churches and families?
- 4) If Jesus is not fully God, how would that affect your assurance of salvation?
- 5) If Jesus is not fully God, how would that affect your own knowledge of what God is like?
- 6) What does it mean to you that each of the three persons of the Trinity is fully engaged in accomplishing your salvation?

God the Father has revealed Himself as the Creator and preserver of the universe, to Whom the entire creation and all creatures are subject.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph C

Glossary

Cultural Mandate: The order given to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to rule over all the creatures of creation (Genesis 1:28).

Ex Nihilo: The teaching that God created the universe out of nothing.

Fiat: An authoritative order, usually meaning that there is no explanation necessary. What is commanded will be done on the power and authority of the one giving the order. In the case of creation, there was nothing else that caused creation to happen, except that God ordered it to happen.

Gnosticism: An early false teaching that all matter was evil and only spirit could be good. The Almighty, the Creator could not have created matter or he would not be good since matter is inherently evil. There had to have been lesser deities who created matter.

Natural Revelation: Those things that we can know about God because he has revealed them about himself through his creation.

Sovereignty: Holding supreme authority and answering only to self for the decisions made. No one else, nothing else can interfere or overrule.

Special Revelation: Those things that we can know about God because he has spoken in his Word, the Bible.

The Apostles' Creed and the Gnostic Heresy

The catechism gives this explanation for the first article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe that God has created me and all that exists. He has given to me and still sustains my body and soul, my senses and all my members, my reason and all the powers of my soul. I believe that He gives me food and clothing, home and family, and all material blessings; that He daily provides abundantly for all the needs of my life, protects me from all danger, and guards and keeps me from all evil. I believe that He does this because of His fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this I should thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 53).

As church leaders in the 21st century, we are going to be answering questions about human life (from beginning to end), about the environment, about the meaning of human history, and about other issues. We will help ourselves if we have an accurate understanding of the beginner of human history, the owner of the environment, and the giver of life.

In the second century AD, there was a philosophical perversion of Christianity that gained significant strength. It was called Gnosticism. One of the basic premises of Gnosticism was that spirit was always associated with good and matter was always associated with evil. The questions faced by this heresy included: How could a good God (spirit) create an evil world (matter)? How could the Son of God (spirit) take on human flesh (matter)? Two ways in which the Gnostics solved these problems were:

- 1) Since the good, spiritual God was totally separated from the evil, material world he could have nothing to do with creating the material world. But there were a number of lesser deities that were not entirely good, including Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. The Gnostics believed that it was Yahweh — this lesser, tainted-by-evil deity — who actually created the world.
- 2) Jesus Christ only appeared to be human (known as the heresy of docetism), or else the physical/material Jesus was joined by the spiritual Christ — another of the lesser deities in the Gnostic pantheon — for a short time between his baptism and the beginning of his suffering.

It may have been in reaction to this error that the church used the phrase “maker of heaven and earth” in the first article of the Apostles' Creed. As a teaching tool, it was important that the Creed affirm that there is only one God, the Father almighty, and that he is the maker of heaven and earth, the God of the Old Testament. The God who loves you and who saves you and cares for you is the God who in his almighty power created all that is visible and all that is invisible. He is inferior to no one; he is the almighty. He is neither remote nor detached, but is very much involved in the life in his creation. Yet he transcends all that we know, imagine, experience, or comprehend.

Gnosticism was also one of the errors that compelled the church to declare which books being circulated in the Church at the time were authoritative. A

Gnostic named Marcion had formed his own canon, from which he eliminated all of the Old Testament and the New Testament except for works of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles.

Some Erroneous Views of Reality

The first article of the Creed rules out such erroneous philosophies as Pantheism, Naturalism, and Deism. The pantheist says that everything is god and god is everything. There is one god that is the sum total of all things that exist — material and immaterial. Everything that exists is one unified whole which is god; anything that is not part of god does not really exist.

The naturalist says that nothing at all exists except the single world of space and time. The universe is all-powerful and eternal. It is all that ever was and all that ever will be. It is infinite. The naturalist would be more likely to say that there is no god, but in the sense of god as the greatest power and ultimate authority — the material universe is the naturalist's god. In the sense that matter created itself and continues to re-create itself, matter is eternal, ultimate reality, all mighty.

The deist believes that God, who made heaven and earth, is the originator of all things, but has left all things on their own. Like a great watchmaker, he designed the intricacies and beauty of creation and then, having wound it up like a giant machine, he left it to run on its own without divine intervention.

The God of the Bible

The God of the Bible is the God who is the almighty. We believe he is transcendent, (that he is greater than and beyond anything we can imagine or know) and that he is immanent (that he is involved in the creation and maintenance of our world and is interested and active in the daily events of our lives).

Psalms 19:1-6

The psalmist (thought to be David, a shepherd, an outdoorsman) declares that God's glory is revealed in creation. He sings the idea that creation at all times and in all places proclaims the work of God's hands. God's work, God's hand — each implies contact and involvement with this universe in which we live. Above it, beyond it, but in touch with and concerned with it. Regularity, consistency, predictability — the so-called laws of nature — declare the regular, dependable care of God in his creation, to whom be glory!

Psalms 8

While Psalm 19 speaks of the universe as praising God, Psalm 8 speaks of the creation of humanity and the wonder of what God has given to human beings within the scope of creation.

The Psalmist says that God's glory is seen in what he has done on earth

in committing his honor to the lips of children and his creation to the care of human beings. Certainly human beings are not divine, they are dust. But the dignity that has been given them by the divine one is immense. Not that the dust people have risen to make themselves worthy of such honor; God made them and crowned them with honor. This dignity is a gift from God in creation. The use of the perfect and present tenses imply that this dignity has not been completely lost after the Fall (considering the image of God in the wider sense). "You made [perfect] him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crown [present] him with glory and honor. You make [present] him ruler over the works of your hands; you put [past] everything under his feet" (VanGemenen, 1991, p. 112, brackets original). Our consciousness of God as the creator of the universe and as the giver of dignity to humanity will help us to treat the universe with respect and serious study and also give to our fellow human beings the honor with which God has crowned each of us.

Because God is the almighty creator who made all things and owns all things and establishes all things, it follows that all things are dependent upon him. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:36).

God Has Revealed Himself

How do we come to know about God? How does anyone come to know about God? Christianity affirms that God reveals himself to us; we do not discover him. God reveals himself to us in two ways, through two kinds of revelation.

Natural Revelation

We look at the heavens and say, "Whoever made all this is really something!" This is natural revelation. Romans 1:20 says, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." Consider also Acts 14:16-17.

Natural revelation also includes conscience. Romans 2:14-15, "Indeed, 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."

Natural revelation is interpreted based on an individual's experience. Two people who have the same experience may interpret that experience in very different ways. Human reason, perspective, and logic are placed in service of the experience, so that one person may perceive a god who is magnificent in beauty and variety, while another may perceive a god who is whimsical and unreliable. One may perceive a god who is cruel and another a god who is just.

It is important to note that, for the believer, natural revelation is interpreted in the light of Scripture.

Special Revelation

Special revelation is God's Word given through the prophets and inspired writers down through the history of Israel and the early Church. It is *the Word written*. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God . . ." (2 Timothy 3:16, KJV). Special revelation is also *the Word incarnate*. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Hebrews 1:1-2 speaks of both aspects of special revelation. They are concrete, objective actions on the part of God to reveal himself in ways that are unusual, extraordinary. Special revelation isn't something mystical or secret, yet it goes beyond human means and methods. At the same time, special revelation involves human action: God became human so that we could know him and God inspired human writers so that the words of men were the Word of God.

Comparisons and Evaluations

Natural revelation will introduce us to a God who is all-powerful (Romans 1:20), but that awareness will not bring us salvation. It will only, at best, give us a guilty conscience (Romans 2:15). Special revelation teaches us that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ Jesus. This special revelation is the knowledge of God that brings salvation. Natural revelation will not save; it only teaches law. The Gospel that brings faith and life and forgiveness of sins is God's special revelation through Jesus Christ and the Spirit-breathed Scriptures.

Paul Little wrote, "There is in human existence no more profound question demanding an answer. Is there a God? is the question that must be answered by every human being, and the answer is far-reaching in its implications for every individual" (Little, 1988, p. 23). Little suggests these reasons to believe there is a God: 1) the presence of the idea of god or gods in almost every culture in nearly every time and place; 2) the necessity of a first cause for all of the effects we see in our world; 3) the fact of order and life in our universe; 4) the fact of a moral sense in the universe; and 5) experiences of people in answered prayer and changed lives.

If one accepts the logic of these arguments that there is a god, it still requires a leap of logic to assume that this god is the Christian God of the Bible. Christians believe that the first cause, the order maker, the moral one is the one revealed in the Bible — but natural revelation will not tell us that. Rational proofs are useful, but for our benefit and for our need, God has revealed himself in his Word, the Bible. As Christians we will put our reason and logic in service of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and through the Bible.

Natural revelation is a revelation of Law. It reveals God's greatness and his power, along with our guilt. Under natural revelation the way to know God is by human rational capabilities.

Special revelation is a revelation of Law and Gospel. It not only shows us our need of a Savior, but also shows us our Savior. Special revelation is a work of the Holy Spirit and is not dependent on human rational capabilities.

God Has Revealed Himself as the Father

We call God Father because of his relationship to Jesus the Son (John 3:16)

In this context, God is Father as a statement of his relationship with God the Son. As the first person of the Holy Trinity, the name that he takes for himself is Father. So the New Testament writers refer to him as the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3). In the Old Testament, God is identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 3:16); after the Son comes into the world, God is identified as Father (John 1:14). At Jesus' baptism, the voice from heaven says, "This is my Son" (Matthew 3:17).

We call God Father because he is the Father of all humanity (Acts 17:28-29)

The fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is an idea that we pick up in our language from time to time. For example, "all men are created equal." This is an affirmation that God is the one who gives life and breath to humanity and that we all stand in his presence as those created equally in the image of God. In this same sense Paul says, "We are his offspring" (Acts 17:29), and writes to the Ephesians, "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (Ephesians 3:14-15).

We call God Father because Jesus taught us to do so in prayer (Matthew 6:9)

Jesus said, "This then is how you should pray: 'Our Father . . .'" Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to the disciples about their Father in heaven. Those gathered there to him hear included Jesus' disciples in the narrow sense of his twelve disciples and in the wider sense of all those who had believed in him for salvation. It is apparent from John 6:60-69 that there were some called disciples who had not yet come to saving faith and perhaps never would. But they were people who were following Jesus and being taught by him and were thus also called disciples. Prayer is an act of faith, however, so as Jesus teaches us to pray, there is a sense in which he also teaches us what it means to believe.

We call God Father because he is the Father of the faithful (Romans 8:14-17)

In the church, we most often use this concept of Father: God has given us new birth through faith in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we are children of God, we address him as Abba, or Father, and we are heirs — co-heirs with Christ. In other passages, believers are referred to as those who are begotten by God, given new birth, or adopted into God's family. We call God Father because he is the one who has given us spiritual-eternal life and preserves that life.

We call God Father because we are like him (Matthew 5:45)

The concept of *son* as used in the New Testament has a connotation of character associated with it. People are sons of light because they act like light. People are sons of darkness because they act like darkness. People are sons of God because they act like God. “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children” (Ephesians 5:1).

Summary

The first century understanding of Father is not automatically like a 21st century understanding. The first century father was the biological progenitor, the head of the family, the provider for the family, the master of the family, but not necessarily the warm caregiver and nurturing person that we idealize in the 21st century. Compassion and affection may not have been normal in the New Testament context. But when we think of God as Father, we are drawn to the story of the prodigal son told by Jesus in Luke 15:11-32. It pictures God as Father in the way that Jesus wanted us to understand him.

The three monotheistic religions in the world are Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Of those, only Christians call God Father. Even though the Old Testament uses that term for God, Judaism calls God Father rarely, if at all.

God Has Revealed Himself as the Creator

He created out of nothing (ex nihilo)

“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Hebrews 11:3).

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1-3).

There was a time when only God existed. The Eternal Trinity: “God the Father...neither begotten nor proceeding, but from eternity begetting the Son, the substantial image of Himself, and with the Son from eternity breathing forth the Holy Spirit... The Son of God...begotten of the Father from eternity, of the same essence and majesty with the Father, who with the Father from eternity breathes forth the Holy Spirit... The Holy Spirit...of the same essence with the Father and the Son, who from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son...” (Mueller, 1955, p. 157-158).

There was nothing else; nothing else was necessary. God created for his glory. John writes (Revelation 4:11) that God created all things because he wanted to. This creation was *ex nihilo* — out of nothing. God’s first creative act was to create the crude material out of which he would create the whole universe. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:1-2).

He Spoke and It Happened

In Psalm 33 the righteous are called to praise the Lord in skillful, joyful song. The first reason is his very nature: righteous, true, faithful, loving. The second reason is given in verses 6-11: he speaks and it happens. By the word of the Lord the heavens were made (33:6), and he commanded and it stood firm (33:9). All of creation reflects the planning and the order of God. His plans and purposes will go forth. They will not be thwarted by anyone or anything; they are implemented by God’s Word. The certainty and the power of the Word are based on the person and power of the One behind it.

In absolute sovereignty, God by the sheer power of his Word created all there is: light out of darkness; life out of nothing.

He created by divine command (fiat)

The second step in the creative process was to give form to what was formless and fill what was empty. The forming took place on the first three days.

The first day, God formed the light and separated it from the darkness. The second day, God formed the oceans and sky. The third day, God formed the seas and the continents and began to grow vegetation.

The task of filling began on the fourth day. On day four, God filled the sky with lights: sun, moon, and stars. On the fifth day, God filled the sky and the waters of the earth with birds and sea creatures. On the sixth day, God filled the dry ground with livestock, wild animals, and man.

Out of nothing, by divine command, God created. Although God formed and filled by arranging what was previously created in Genesis 1:1, it does not appear to have been accomplished by powers resident in creation, but by the word of God. God said, “Let there be...and there was...” However, “laws of nature” are often given credit for what is really divine command. The word and will of God is the primary, first cause, whatever the secondary cause may be.

He made all things good

All of this is pronounced good by God the Creator.

The “good” that the author had in view has a very specific range of meaning in chapter 1 — the “good” is that which is *beneficial* for man... Throughout this opening chapter God is depicted as the one who both knows what is “good” for man and is intent on providing the “good” for him (Sailhammer, 1990, p. 26, italics original).

It is important for us to see that while we live in a world where there is much that we would say is not good, creation was pronounced by God in the beginning to be good, very good actually. God is good and his creation was good. It had purpose, design and order.

God placed humanity into his good creation. In that creation, God gave humans work to do. Humans were to take care of the creation, to till and tend it, to be fruitful and increase, to fill the earth and subdue it, to rule over the fish and the fowl and every creeping creature. God had a purpose for creation and he had a purpose for humans in that creation.

Then he rested

Finally, we see God the creator resting on the seventh day. “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (Genesis 2:2-3).

The third commandment says, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8).

God did not stop working after the six days of creation. God rested only in the sense that he stopped creating new and additional things. The record states that he “rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” His other works continued. “This [gift of sight to a man born blind] happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:3b-5). Here Jesus talks about the continuing work of God in redemption.

In John 5:16-17 Jesus also refers to the work of the Father. “So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. Jesus said to them, ‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.’” In this instance, Jesus alludes to the continuing work of the Father as the one who “does not suspend his activities on the Sabbath. The laws of nature take no holiday. If a man cuts himself on the Sabbath, the healing process begins immediately” (Tenney, 1981, p. 64). Jesus is involved with the Father in the continuing work of caring for creation.

The command to keep the Sabbath is related to the creation event (Exodus 20:8-11, where rest is commanded in view of the fact that creation is completed) and the Exodus-Sinai event (Deuteronomy 5:12-15, where rest is commanded in view of the fact that God delivered the slaves from Egypt).

Taking a closer look at the commandment, we ask, “What does it mean?” Luther’s Small Catechism answers, “This means that we should fear and love God so that we do not despise His word and the preaching of it, but consider it to be holy and gladly hear and learn it” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 23).

In the New Testament, without fanfare, instruction, or explanation, we see the Church gathering on Sunday, the first day of the week. Did they still celebrate the Sabbath? Luke 24:53 tells us, “They stayed continually at the temple, praising God.” How long this habit endured, the Bible does not say. The book of the Acts records that they stayed in an upstairs room in Jerusalem (1:13), and that on the day of Pentecost, they were all together in one place (2:1).

Because the resurrection of Christ took place on the first day of the week and the Holy Spirit was given on the first day of the week (Pentecost), Sunday has been the traditional day the Christian Church has gathered for worship. It is nowhere commanded.

The *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism* asks and answers, “Does Sunday replace the Sabbath Day of the Old Testament? No, most Christians observe Sunday, the first day of the week, as a matter of free choice as did the

early Christians, not in order to keep the law, but to rest their bodies and to have a set time to worship God and hear his Word” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 24). In this way, they celebrated God’s creation and God’s salvation. Both creation and salvation are God’s completed works, in which we rest.

“What are some ways to observe Sunday? I may observe Sunday by meeting for public worship, hearing God’s Word, and receiving the Lord’s Supper; by showing kindness to others; and by using this day to rest and renew myself” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 24).

The law concerning the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath of the Lord, on which the Jews were to rest from all labor, was not changed by any human authority, but was abrogated by the Lord Himself (Matthew 12:8; Colossians 2:16; Romans 14:5-6). Neither God nor the apostles appointed Sunday or any other day as the day of rest and worship, but of their own free choice the early Christians met on the first day of the week for worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2) (Koehler, 1971, p. 57).

Summary

There is a beginning to human history — one initiated by the Almighty and accomplished by speaking the Word. The whole world and everything in it was created by him and belongs to him. Human beings are part of it.

Sabbath and Sunday celebrate creation, redemption, and re-creation. It is a sign of the future here in the present. There is a rest for the people of God, an eternal rest in what God has accomplished.

God Has Revealed Himself as the Preserver of All Things

He is present and active in creation

From the deist’s understanding, God made the world so that it would be self-sufficient. He wound it up and let it go. The universe is a smooth running machine that requires no outside intervention. In the mind of the deist, if God has to get involved in a miraculous way, that implies that there was a flaw in the machine somewhere. There was faulty construction, an idea that borders on being blasphemous for the strict deist. God would not build something that is flawed. Deism also implies that human beings are just cogs in the machine.

So while deists might approve of the idea that God is creator, they would not admit that God is preserver of all things except through the laws built into nature. Someone has said that many Christians are practical deists; we don’t act as though we believe God is personally involved in our world today.

Christians confess that God chose to be active in the world he created. We believe that it was his desire to have fellowship with human beings. Consider, for example, “God is love” (1 John 4:16), and compare Revelation 3:20. God is transcendent above all things. We believe that he is now involved in our world by choice, not by necessity.

We believe that God is the one who sustains “all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:3). “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” Colossians 1:17.

As the one who preserves all things, God is active in the events of life. Furthermore, Romans 8:28 tells us, “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” God is not absent, nor is he uninvolved.

God is an active preserver of his creation.

We assume this is true when we pray. We can accept miracles because we know that this world is open to God. We have the assurance of his benevolent presence, even when it seems that things are going wrong. God is good; God is involved.

The Christian knows that God created everything good and still works for the good of his people in all things. So the Christian has assurance that God can use for good even the evil that happens because of sin in creation. In God’s hand the effects of evil may be used to call people to repentance, to instruct and teach people character, to create a sign of grace in the world, or for some other purpose according to his loving will.

He is active through orders/callings he has established

God uses different methods to sustain his creation: sometimes miracles, normally the “laws of nature” (Genesis 8:22; Matthew 5:45) and institutions he has ordained, all according to his Word. As someone has said, “God often delegates.”

Romans 13:1-7 teaches us about the authorities that God has established. Their purpose is to maintain safety and order. Our respect for the authorities includes rendering taxes, revenue, respect, and honor. This is consistent with the commandment that reads, “Honor your father and mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.” What does this commandment mean? “This means that we should fear and love God so that we do not despise our parents or those in authority nor provoke them to anger, but honor, serve, obey, love, and think highly of them” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 26).

Putting Paul’s teaching of Romans 13 in context, there came a day when the Roman emperor declared Christianity illegal. Christians were then ordered to confess and worship Caesar as lord, something they could not do because Jesus is Lord alone. Yet Paul wrote “the authorities that exist have been established by God” (Romans 13:1). These authorities are God’s servants. They are owed the respect and honor God commands, because God has placed them in this position. But when they command what God forbids (or forbid what God commands), then the Christian applies Acts 5:29b, “We must obey God rather than men!”

Lutherans have traditionally argued that God has two kinds of servants in the world: civil servants and Gospel servants. Each of these servants has work to do in the world in service to God. The civil servant has a law and order sphere of service and the Gospel servant has a Word and sacrament sphere of service. God has given each of them their work to do. We should not expect that one

should try to do the work of the other. God does not call the Church to take up arms to punish criminals (the king serves God in that work) nor does God call the king to bring people to faith (the Church serves God in that work).

Jesus acknowledged to Pilate that he, Jesus, was a king, but that his kingdom was not of this world — so he submitted to the rule of Pilate in judgment. But while Jesus’ kingdom is not *of* this world, it is *in* this world. Jesus’ kingdom does not derive its power, values, or methods from this world. Jesus’ kingdom is in this world to speak about eternal truths, values, powers and realities.

While God is the sustainer of his creation, human beings are given responsibility to care for it. If we believe that God is the creator of all things and that the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it (Psalm 24:1), and if we believe that God has given humans the charge to care for the earth (Genesis 1:28; 2:15), then we ought to be most concerned about the right care of God’s world. Christians ought to continue to be those who study God’s world to better understand and care for it. Why does it seem that those who worship the creation itself care more for the creation than do those who worship the creator? This should not be.

Since God lets us breathe his air, it is an act of gratitude to care for that air. As Christians, our appreciation for both the privilege and the responsibility we have should make us the most balanced and thoughtful environmentalists in the service of the creator.

God Has Revealed Himself as Sovereign Over All Created Things

God made everything

In Genesis 1 we see that all creation and all creatures were made by God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. We did not come into existence by our own power or strength and we cannot sustain ourselves by our own power or strength. Everything that is — whether visible or invisible — it is the product of God’s creative work. All creation finds its source and beginning in God as creator. As creator, God rules creation.

God evaluates everything

Initially, God determined that everything was very good (Genesis 1:31). God from the very beginning set the standards by which creation is evaluated. Each human is evaluated by God against the design of that initial creation (Kolb, 1993, p. 59). To the degree that we are not what we were created to be, we fall short in the evaluation. If we excuse our falling short on the basis of being “only human,” we are actually blaming our creator for our own failure. Our problems are the result of our rebellion against the creator; they are not a result of the creation.

God places all things under Christ

I pray also that...you may know...his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength,

which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:18-23).

Christ sits far above everyone and everything that presumes to have any power. He rules nature. He rules the Church. He rules the future. All creatures are subject to him: believers and unbelievers, angels and devils. The phrase “for the church” in Ephesians 1:22 means that Christ, as head over everything, is given to the Church for the benefit of the Church.

If it ever appears that things are running amuck and that whoever is in charge of the store has left, that isn’t true. God is the preserver. He is present and active. Everything we see is subject to him. If we think the devil has so much power and is a threat to us and to the Church, we must remember that God is ruling on the throne. When we don’t understand just what is going on in the world, we are assured that Christ is ruling over everything for the benefit of the Church. It is also true that the Church exists for the good of the world.

God is sovereign

James 4:13-15 speaks of the plans we make to engage in our business — where we will be, how long we will be there, and what we expect the results to be (our mission statements). The point is that we will only accomplish these plans “if the Lord wills.”

In Genesis 50:20, Joseph acknowledges the sovereignty of God working through the evil intent of people to accomplish good out of it all. God works good not only for the one who suffered, but for those who caused the pain also.

Job 1:6-12 gives us a glimpse into heaven’s throne room where we see that God draws a line that Satan cannot cross; his activities are constrained by the sovereign God. Satan can only afflict the believer to the degree that God allows.

Study Questions

- 1) How would you talk about God to a person who found the concept of God as Father to be repulsive because his or her earthly father was or is hateful?
- 2) God is the preserver of all things. But how do you talk about things that go wrong when God seemingly fails to preserve?
- 3) List some things that would be different if the universe were not God’s creation, but simply eternal, self-sustaining matter and energy. What is the difference between using the term *creation* and the term *nature* in teaching settings?
- 4) “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” How could that affect the way that Christians think about environmentalism?
- 5) “At the end of time God is going to make everything new, a new heaven and a new earth, and it therefore doesn’t matter what we do with this one.” How would you respond to that statement?
- 6) Our statement of faith does not say *when* God created the heavens and the earth, only that he *did*. What difference might that make, if any?

God created Adam and Eve in His image to live in fellowship with Him. They fell into sin through the temptation of Satan and thereby lost fellowship with God. Through their disobedience the entire human race became totally depraved, that is, self-centered sinners who oppose God, and who by nature are unable to trust, fear or love Him. They are subject to the devil, and are condemned to death under the eternal wrath of God.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph D

Glossary

Anthropology: The study of man; the doctrine of human nature.

Total Depravity: “[W]e believe, teach, and confess that original sin is not a slight corruption of human nature, but that it is so deep a corruption that nothing sound or uncorrupted has survived in man’s body or soul, in his inward or outward powers” (Tappert, 1959, p. 467).

Introduction

Human nature

The question comes up often — when making ministry decisions, when visiting with people about the way of salvation, when explaining the beliefs of the CLB about how people are saved: “What is the nature of the fallen human?” If we do not feel the gravity of human lostness or the degree of human lostness, we will not speak clearly about God’s salvation.

Modern understandings of human nature

Contemporary humanism affirms the innate goodness of humanity — if people are given the right conditions, the right opportunities, the right environment, and the right information, then they will do the right thing. For example, the problem with drug abuse comes from bad friends, lack of education, negative parental involvement, poor self-esteem, or any number of other social problems. The Bible would say that these are not the only causes of drug abuse, but that all those problems and drug abuse are symptoms of a sinful nature that cooperates with the ways of the world. (World here means the human society that is opposed to God.)

The anthropology of the late 20th century science-fiction show *Star Trek* suggested that people will continue to evolve, develop and grow until they become compassionate, wise, and truly human. For example, in one of the *Star Trek* movies, the Starship *Enterprise* crew came back from the distant future to the 20th century and had to learn to use profanity in order to blend into 20th century culture. In their own enlightened era, mankind had outgrown such vulgar use of language.

Many counseling theories agree with the *Star Trek* idea and emphasize the need to allow this natural goodness to grow and work out in the person. Interestingly, several counseling theorists began their careers by studying theology. As they left divinity school, they took with them truths such as God’s unconditional love, but dismissed the reality of fallen human nature. They understood the power of acceptance to bring wholeness to the individual, but they omitted the need of forgiveness.

There is a legitimate guilt issue that needs to be resolved; it is a Godward problem. Our social and personal issues are symptoms of this problem with God.

If we only address the social and personal issues, we can often manipulate people into behaving better. There are at least two problems with that:

- 1) We don’t do them any enduring good when we don’t address the problem of guilt before God.
- 2) When the pressure that makes them want to behave better is relieved, they may easily return to their former bad behavior.

Human relational issues are symptoms of a problem with God. The relationship with God needs to be addressed if human relationships are to flourish as God intended.

In congregations, where people care for people, a correct understanding of

human beings is essential to our work. This paragraph of the statement of faith addresses the nature of human beings.

For people involved in the life and leadership of the church, a biblical view of human nature is important in formulating Christian Education goals. What kind of people are we teaching? We need to hear God's Word about what people are like.

A biblical view of human nature is important to evangelism goals. What is the urgency of evangelism? What are the obstacles to evangelism? How can one be converted? How is one justified? Do people need to be converted?

A biblical view of human nature is important to our sanctification goals. How deadly is sin? How pervasive is sin in the human psyche? How do we counsel someone struggling with sin?

On the subject of righteousness and human nature, it is important to recognize the distinction between civil righteousness and spiritual righteousness. Many people are very righteous people in the civil sense. Many of our neighbors are very nice, good people from a human perspective. Yet spiritually, as they stand before God, they may very well be bankrupt, having no righteousness that will hold up in God's court.

Pelagianism

This problem of misunderstanding human nature is not new.

Pelagianism presented perhaps the greatest threat to the gospel in the days of Augustine's ministry (391-430 AD). It began harmlessly enough. Pelagius, the "British monk," issued a stirring call for sanctification of the many nominal believers found at Rome at the beginning of the fifth century. His basic concerns — divine justice and human responsibility — could not in themselves be a reason for controversy (Bromiley, 1978, p. 117).

Pelagius taught:

- 1) God has not willed to command anything impossible, for he is righteous; and he will not condemn a man for what he [man] could not help, for he [God] is holy.
- 2) Everything good and everything evil... is done by us, not born with us (Bromiley, 1978, p. 117).
- 3) Adam's sin affected only Adam; each person born since Adam is a new creation of God and has the capacity to obey God, just as Adam had.
- 4) "The only effect of Adam's sin was the bad example he left for his descendants" (Thiessen, 1979, p. 186).

Pelagius was concerned with nominal Christianity and spiritual carelessness. But the effect of Pelagianism is to soften the demands of God in order to make them attainable. Pelagianism also diminishes the reality of human sinfulness. Pelagius' ideas are unscriptural. Consider, for example, Psalm 51:5, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me," and Romans 5:18-19, "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that

brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

The Formula of Concord, written by Lutheran theologians after the Reformation, presents their understanding of biblical teaching (see chapter 11 of this commentary, *The Confessions*). Concerning Pelagianism, the Formula states:

We likewise reject the Pelagian error which asserts that man's nature is uncorrupted even after the Fall, and especially that in spiritual things its natural powers remained wholly good and pure. Likewise the teaching that original sin is a slight insignificant spot or blemish that has only been sprinkled or splashed on externally and that underneath man's nature has retained unimpaired its powers for good even in spiritual things.

We also reject the error of the crass Pelagians who taught that by his own powers, without the grace of the Holy Spirit, man can convert himself to God, believe the Gospel, whole-heartedly obey God's law, and thus merit forgiveness of sins and eternal life (Tappert, 1959, p. 467-468 and p. 471).

Pelagius taught that man was basically good, could choose to live without sin, and could be pleasing to God in his own righteousness. It was very much like the error that Paul addressed in Romans 10:3 "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."

There are still those today who teach that people can make some movement toward God. God will respond to that human initiative, reach out and complete the work of salvation. This is called semi-Pelagianism and is reflected in two old sayings: "God helps those who help themselves" and "You do your best and God will do the rest." The idea is that if we make some move toward God, he will respond — by grace empowering us to do the works necessary for salvation. This idea was not and is not new; it goes back to New Testament days where the letter to the Galatians addresses this very same error.

Another modification of Pelagianism teaches that God initiates the saving relationship, but it is up to us to finish it. "God has done his part, now it is up to you to do your part." This idea, called synergism, again asks human beings to cooperate, or work together (synergize) with God, for salvation. Often, the work required is faith. The problem with this is that faith is made into a meritorious work that adds to what God has done. However, the Bible tells us that faith itself is a gift of God, not something we must contribute to our salvation. We are the ones who believe, but God — through the Gospel — gives us faith.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). To be "poor" is to be hopelessly destitute, without the most elementary resources for life and thus totally dependent on God. We who are spiritually poor cannot become alive spiritually unless someone saves us from the death that is our fate. We have no spiritual strength, no spiritual resources, nothing to contribute to our salvation. This is the natural human

condition.

Human beings were created to enjoy fellowship with God. Sin has broken that fellowship. But Pelagius claimed that fellowship wasn't really broken. Semi-pelagians agree that the fellowship was broken, but say if we reach up, God will be pleased with our effort and reach down. Synergists say that God has stretched his hand down; we simply need to reach up and take his hand. The Bible says that God comes down and takes our hand.

God Created Adam and Eve

In his image

God, the Holy Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — created out of nothing all of the raw materials necessary for creation on the first day of history by merely speaking them into existence. This God did for his own glory. It was not because he was lonely. There are eternally three persons; loneliness implies some lack in God. Nor was it because he needed someone to love (same rationale). See Genesis 1:26-31 and Genesis 2:4-25.

On the sixth creation day, as the crown of his creative work, God created humans, both male and female, in his image. God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life. This does not imply that human beings are divine, but it does demonstrate that life comes from God.

“Let us make man in our image, in our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). The image of God was not an afterthought added sometime later. It was part of humans from the moment of creation. Humans reflect some of what and who God is. The characteristics of humans that image God include rationality, community, creativity, conscience (knowing that some things are right and some things are wrong) and dominion (ruling over the rest of creation).

Humans were created by God to have charge of his world, to stand in the place of God before the rest of creation. As the crown of creation, people are the creator's representative on earth and ruler over the rest of God's creation. At the same time they are part of creation along with the other creatures (Genesis 1:28; 2:7c). Mankind is the manager, but not the owner. God owns all things — the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. But God has committed his creation to the care of people.

In the paradise before sin came, Adam and Eve were given work to do. People still work. The believer is called to honor God and care for people and manage God's world. This is part of our calling or vocation. We value education as it prepares us for our calling. We value our calling as a way in which we image God.

To live in fellowship with him

The grand purpose of creation was first to glorify God and second for Adam and Eve to have fellowship with God. Again, it was not that God needed the company, but rather that people might be blessed in fellowship with the creator. The second chapter of Genesis is a picture of fellowship and harmony

in all relationships: man to man, man to self, man to nature, but especially in the man to God dimension.

Today God still desires that each of us should enjoy his company. John speaks of this in 1 John 1:3. Certainly, this will be fully experienced when we all sit down at the eternal banquet table, but it is also something that God desires now. Since God is love, it only makes sense that his nature is to love. Within the Trinity, the relationships are characterized by love. Remarkably, those holy, holy, holy persons want to include rebellious humans in their community of love.

Adam and Eve Fell into Sin

“They fell into sin through the temptation of Satan and thereby lost fellowship with God.”

Temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan

God created everything good. Angels are part of God's good creation. Created good, some of the angels sinned. Created to serve God (Psalm 103:20), they rebelled against their assignment (Jude 6) and were judged by God. “The leader of the fallen angels is the devil” (Wisløff, 1983, p. 34).

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in perfect fellowship with God and with each other. “The man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). Into this setting came the devil, assuming the form of a serpent. Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 make this identification clear and certain. Satan's approach to the woman began with the words, “Did God really say...?” (Genesis 3:1). Framing the temptation in this way, the devil led the woman to question the goodness of God and the Word of God. Later, the Word of God was directly challenged, “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4).

Why did Adam and Eve disobey God and rebel against his express command? Doubt of God's clear Word, combined with the self-centered desire for wisdom, selfish pride, and the desire to satisfy their appetites.

What was the result of their act of unbelief and disobedience? Forfeiture of their innocence, holiness, harmony and fellowship with God.

Which came first, the doubt or the desire? Notice that Satan's first approach is, “Did God really say . . .?” Notice also Satan's approach to Jesus in the desert right after Jesus' baptism. At the baptism, the voice from heaven said, “This is my Son...” Satan then tempts Christ, saying, “If you are the Son of God...” While the statement does not directly challenge the truth of the condition, it is expressed in a way that casts doubt on the truth.

In both cases, Satan proposes skepticism toward the Word of God before trying to awaken desire. This suggests that disobedience flows from unbelief. In the context of doubt of God's Word, Eve's desire was ignited “when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom” (Genesis 3:6). By contrast, Jesus' response was to affirm the Word of God.

Temptation is often like that: doubt, desire, disbelief, disobedience. There

are also times when disobedience leads to disbelief. People who choose to act in ways that conflict with what they believe experience a dissonance in their lives that must be resolved either by changing their behavior or changing their beliefs.

They fell into sin

This event is called *the Fall*. The implication is that Adam and Eve had a lofty position from which they fell. Their position of innocence and blessedness in the presence of God was exchanged for guilt and condemnation, expulsion from the presence of God. This new condition is called *sinful*.

So the first idea behind the word *sin* is that of a condition. Whereas human nature was originally without sin, the Bible speaks of human nature after the fall as sinful.

The Bible also speaks of sin in terms of actions, both active and passive. The basic sin is unbelief (Hebrews 3:12). It is so basic that the Bible says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6).

Other words are used for sin. One is *failure*, which means *missing the mark*. We sin when we fail to be what God demands. We fail to love God with all our heart and all our soul, and all our mind and all our strength.

Another word for sin is *trespass*. The common understanding of this word is *crossing over a boundary, stepping across a line, doing wrong*.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask forgiveness for *debts* in the sense of *obligations incurred because of moral failure*. Each of us owes God perfect obedience all of our days. When we fail once in that perfect obedience, there is no way to make up what we owe. Therefore, we are debtors to God.

Transgressions are sins that signify *a revolt against God*. Transgression is used repeatedly in Psalm 51 and Isaiah 53 to speak of sin. It gives the sense that we have worshipped someone or something other than God. That idol is usually self and selfish desires; the sin is rebellion against our king, disloyalty to and betrayal of his kingdom.

Sin is something that we are and something that we do. It is our failure to live up to God’s high standards, but it is also our rebellion against God. It is weakness and it is also defiance.

We tend to focus on commandments two through ten. It is more often the neglect of the first commandment that is at the root of our problem. We are in rebellion because we have chosen other gods, for example, the idol of selfish desire. Human beings were designed to worship, but our sinful nature will worship anything other than God.

The result of sin is guilt, and thus condemnation. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). This death, a result of the fall, means the absence of spiritual life — separation from God, the source of spiritual life. This death is actual death. One cannot be half dead. Therefore, as one who is dead, I cannot seek God, find God, or desire to know God. In order for me to live, God must come to me. In the Garden, God came looking for the rebellious couple and called to the man, “Where are you?” God still calls to us sinners through his powerful, life-giving Word. (See 1 Peter 1:23-25.)

Consequences of the Fall

Fallen relationships

Notice the result when Adam ate the fruit. “[Eve] also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Genesis 3:6b-7).

Probably the first result of their sin that Adam and Eve experienced was a negative change in their marriage. The enigmatic statement, “They realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves,” at least indicates a strain in their relationship. They suddenly felt they had something to hide from one another. Then, when facing God, Adam blamed Eve for his sin. Selfishness and cruelty replaced love in the first human relationship. Genesis 3:16 indicates that their relationship would now be marked by struggles for supremacy instead of service. The words *desire* and *rule* indicate that their marriage relationship would be characterized by the need to “lord it over” each other.

Compare Genesis 3:16, “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you,” and Genesis 4:7, “Sin...desires to have you, but you must master it.” The terminology is the same; in chapter three the desire-mastery struggle is between husband and wife; in chapter four the desire-mastery struggle is between sin and Cain.

This interpersonal problem was evidence of a primary and more serious problem. Adam and Eve experienced a break in their relationship with God. When they became aware of God’s presence, they tried to hide from him. The human relationship with God, once characterized by love, was now characterized by fear.

Having tried in vain to hide from God, they then made excuses for their sin, to the point of trying to blame God. They implied that their disobedience was God’s fault because he created the possibility for sin in creating the woman and the serpent.

Fallen creation

Adam’s rebellion brought sin into the world and damaged all of creation. Childbearing became painful; work became difficult and less productive, thorns and thistles reduced fruitfulness in crops; death became part of the human experience.

Nature — which God created and declared to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31) and which still “declares the glory of God” (Psalm 8:9; 19:1) — is waiting “in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:19-22). Someone said, “Creation did not fall, but it was fallen upon.”

Total depravity

The disobedience of Adam and Eve has consequences for all of humanity. Genesis 6:5 states, “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” Paul writes, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

Adam bears the responsibility for the presence of sin and death in the world. All of humanity suffers the consequences of Adam’s unbelief and rebellion against God. The innocence, holiness, and wisdom that Adam would have passed on to his descendants were no longer his to pass on. Although this may seem unfair to us, we all ratify his representation of us when we ourselves sin. We inherit Adam’s guilt and we inherit his depravity. We understand it to be total depravity because it affects every person, it affects us from the moment we become persons, and it affects every part of our person.

Human innocence and holiness were lost in guilt; knowledge and wisdom were lost in unbelief and rebellion. The human will formerly willed what God willed and had the ability to sin or not sin. Now it was unable not to sin. The heart that formerly loved what God loved now did not really know what God loved and could not love him as he ought to be loved. The humans had become self-centered sinners who opposed God. Isaiah 53:6 describes the change: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”

Total depravity means that people originally created in God’s image are now spiritually dead. When God commands good works, they cannot obey. When he calls for them to fear, love and trust him above all things, they cannot do it. They are dead.

There is not only an objective defect in man’s relation to God, so that he is justly under God’s disfavor (Romans 1:18); but there is a great subjective defect in his nature which renders him unable by his own powers to reestablish the right relation between himself and God, or to do anything which is really pleasing to God (1 Corinthians 2:14; John 6:44). He has by nature a wrong attitude toward God and things divine and a bias toward evil, which he is unable by his own efforts to overcome. He not only does not love God with all his heart, but he is utterly unable so to love Him. The natural mind is not only not friendly to God but is actually hostile to Him (Romans 1:28; 8:7). All man’s psychological powers are defective in the spiritual realm. His intellect cannot know or understand the things of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:14); his feelings are moved to love and fear by the wrong objects (Romans 8:5, 8); and his will, while able to function in external and earthly matters, is unable to function in the higher spiritual sphere, and cannot will to serve God (Philippians 2:13) (Stump, 1932, p. 119).

The condition of total depravity does not mean that fallen man always behaves as badly as he could. Most of us are capable of worse behavior than we normally display. For example, our behavior may be improved by good parenting. There are also fences that help to check our base impulses: peer pressure, police, family, and church family. It is therefore possible for people who do not know Christ to be nicer, more helpful, more loving, and more

patient than Christians.

Total depravity does speak to our inability to relate to spiritual life. We are completely tainted by our hereditary sinfulness to the point where we are infected through and through with the death-bringing disease of sin. While we undoubtedly could be worse than we are from a human point of view, we have no capacity to seek God or trust him. There is nothing in us that can respond to God (Ephesians 2:1), please God (Isaiah 64:6), or love God. Instead fallen man seeks to please self (2 Timothy 3:2-4), actively opposes God (Romans 8:7), and is so disordered as to be unable to understand his problem (Ephesians 4:17-18). Fallen man needs to repent, but he cannot do it.

It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit. Rejected in this connection are the Pelagians and others who deny that original sin is sin, for they hold that natural man is made righteous by his own powers, thus disparaging the sufferings and merit of Christ (Tappert, 1959, p. 29).

The image of God in humanity now corrupted

Humans were created to image God in God’s creation. Features of the image still cling to humans, but the effect is not what was intended in creation.

Humans still have dominion and rule over creation, but they do it selfishly, badly, and tend toward exploitation rather than care of creation.

Humans are still creative, but they often create things that are ghastly, dangerous, threatening, immoral, and harmful to others.

Humans are still moral beings, but their sense of right and wrong tends toward calling evil good and calling good evil. Morality is often based on personal preference rather than divine standard.

Humans are still reasonable, but they use their rational capacities to reject God more than to serve him.

Humans are still relational, but they tend to use each other rather than love and serve one another.

Self-centered sinners

Because each human being since Adam is born with this inherited guilt and inherited corruption, which is called *inherited sin* or *original sin*, it is not surprising that people commit sins. The Bible calls this nature with which we are born the “old Adam” and “flesh” and “sin living in me” and “sinful nature” (Romans 7:17-18). Because we have this sinful nature, “actual sin” is our daily experience. The Lutheran Confession clarifies the relationship between the two, saying of inherited sin, “We must consider this as the chief sin, the root and fountain of all actual sin” (Tappert, 1959, p. 509). Actual sins can be committed in the mind or the body or both. They may be things we do that we ought not to have done or things we ought to have done that we have left undone (Matthew

5:21-22; 27-28; 15:19; 25:24-30; James 4:17).

Sometimes, we distinguish between *sin* and *sins*. *Sin* can refer to the sinful nature (1 John 1:8, “If we claim to be without sin...”). *Sins* then refers to acts committed or omitted (1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins...”). This is difficult to adhere to rigorously, but it can be a helpful distinction.

Unable to trust, fear, or love God

The Apostle Paul strings together a list of quotations from the Old Testament in Romans 3:10-18. “No one is righteous, not even one; there is no one...who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together come worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one... There is no fear of God before their eyes.” This is not a pretty picture, and people often deny that it is true. In Romans 5:10, Paul describes humans as “God’s enemies.”

We are, by nature, opposed to God and unable to trust, fear, or love him. Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, “We were by nature objects of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). He also says, “You were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (or born from above)” (John 3:3). That is an absolute statement, with no apparent exception. By nature, we cannot understand God and don’t want to have anything to do with him — much less love and trust him.

For those “totally depraved, self-centered sinners who oppose God, and who by nature are unable to trust, fear or love Him,” God took the initiative to accomplish and apply salvation. He did it for us. We were “dead in... transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). While we were powerless (Romans 5:6), God acted in Christ to give life to the dead, sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf.

According to Romans 10:17, Romans 1:16, and 1 Peter 1:23-25, God does his work of delivering life and salvation to us by means of the Gospel.

Subject to the devil and condemned to death

Romans 6:23 states that “the wages of sin is death.” Certainly the payback for sin includes the natural consequences of sin: sickness, sadness, alienation, and other things that come to us because of sin in the world. But beyond those significant temporal consequences lies the ultimate and eternal payback for sin — death.

There are only two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, ruled by the devil. All humanity belongs to one kingdom or the other. There is no third option. There is no overlap of kingdoms so that one could be in both at the same time.

Because of sin, God has turned us over to the power of the devil (1 John 3:8; John 8:44). Indeed, we are born into this kingdom and cannot see the kingdom of God without the new birth (John 3:1-7). Paul describes this natural condition of fallen humanity:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in

those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3).

To follow the “ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air” is to be “subject to the devil.” Unfortunately, people who are subject to the devil generally don’t even know it. We’ve gotten used to it. We don’t know anything else. The Bible speaks of people as being blind. Having been blind in this sense from birth, we may not think it unusual to be without sight. Darkness is all we have known, so we don’t even think of ourselves as being in the dark, or blind, or imprisoned. John writes that people “loved darkness rather than light” (John 3:19).

To be objects of wrath means that we only know God as judge and enemy. He is not one who we would fear, love and trust above all things.

To be objects of wrath means that we are “condemned to death under the eternal wrath of God.” Certainly this death includes physical death, the separation of body and soul. But more serious is the condemnation to eternal death, separation from God forever. This future for those remaining under God’s wrath is described throughout the Scriptures in horrific terms.

See, for example, Matthew 8:12; Matthew 25:41; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 16:25-26; and Revelation 20:15.

Conclusion

God’s purpose

“God’s purpose is to recreate His image in me and to make a new heaven and a new earth” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 60).

God wants me to be reconciled to him. “God 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 implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

God wants me to be reconciled to others. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

God’s capacity to forgive is infinite because he has removed the problem that stands in the way of reconciliation — our sin. All human sin (inherited from Adam) and all human sins (committed by us) are taken care of on the cross of Christ. God invites us with open arms. There are no hoops to jump through and no fences to hurdle.

Human capacity to accept forgiveness is nil. Our nature is that corrupt. All the work that Christ has done will be to no avail unless God graciously draws the sinner to himself (John 6:44) through the gracious call of the Gospel (Romans 10:17). Our free choice is sin, but “God also works for our willing and believing’... Hence ‘it is God who brings about in a man the very will to believe,’ while ‘to consent to the calling of God or to refuse it...belongs to our own will’” (Quoting Augustine, Bromiley, 1978, p. 121).

Ministry implications

In view of all that has been discussed here, there are some things that we, as the Church of Jesus Christ, should consider:

- 1) Since mankind is lost and is by nature under the eternal wrath of God, if there is hope for salvation, that hope must be pursued. Pursuing that hope involves asking if humans really are lost, if they really need salvation, and if Jesus alone is the way of salvation. Popular culture suggests that everyone who dies goes to heaven. Someone referred to this as the doctrine of “justification by death.” In other words, all that is necessary for one to enter heaven is that one has to die.
- 2) Since mankind can do nothing to save itself or contribute toward its own salvation, then the only hope for humanity is a salvation that is accomplished, in total, by God on behalf of mankind. The problem we face in the Euro-American culture is a humanistic perspective that places salvation in the hands of the individual person or humanity in general. “Man is his own messiah” is one way that idea has been expressed. The Bible teaches a hopelessness for self-salvation that is not readily acknowledged by humans. But in the middle of that hopelessness, there is a hope that comes from God. It is not just potential, but is actually, already accomplished by God in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).
- 3) If we find that we are troubled by sin in our lives, we should not be surprised; that is our nature. We should see this troubling as a sign of God’s work in our lives. Compare Romans 7:7-21 where Paul talks about struggling with the difference between the good he wants to do and what he actually does. He sees in himself two warring factions. Because of the old nature — inherited sin — we will struggle with sin in our lives until we die or Christ returns. The old nature cannot be improved or fixed. God’s plan is to put it to death and he calls us to do that daily in repentance and faith. We should not be surprised when we see sin in our lives or in the lives of others; we are by nature sinners. But neither should we be satisfied with sin in our lives because sin wages war against our souls.
- 4) Should we expect that fallen people would just naturally come to our church in repentance, seeking salvation? No! If we know the need and have the means to meet the need, what does love require of us? James 2:16-17 and 1 John 3:16-18 tell us that followers of Christ and children of God are compelled to act as God acted. He did what was necessary so that we might be saved. Romans 3:10-12 reminds us that no one seeks God. Instead God is the seeker — note the parables of the lost sheep, coin, and son in Luke 15 — and the work of Jesus is to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). As followers of Christ, we do not sit and wait for people to come to our church. Instead, we are seeking, searching, and speaking the words that change people from rebels to friends.

Study Questions

- 1) If people are really dead in their trespasses and sins, what will it take to give them life?
- 2) Does the concept of total depravity encourage a church mission that opens the doors and waits for people to come to find Christ?
- 3) Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. There was little for him to gain by his actions other than to be true to his nature — that is what he is like. How could a church image God in its missionary approach?
- 4) Explain which view of human nature, Pelagius' or Paul's (and Augustine's), is most common today in the culture at large. Which is most common in the Church?
- 5) If Pelagius is right, we can wait for people to make the first move. If Paul is right...?
- 6) If Pelagius is right, we can be surprised when people fail and we can challenge them when they feel inadequate. If Paul is right, how should we respond to people in their failure and in their feelings of inadequacy?
- 7) If God created humans to rule over creation and care for each other, how could that affect our view of work?

Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, is the image of the invisible God. To accomplish our redemption, He became fully human, being conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Jesus Christ, who is true God and true man, by His perfect obedience and substitutionary death on the cross, has purchased our redemption. He rose from the dead for our justification in the body in which He was crucified. He ascended into heaven, where He is now seated at the right hand of God, the Father, as our interceding High Priest. He will come a second time personally, bodily, and visibly to gather the believers unto Himself and to establish His millennial kingdom. He will judge the living and the dead and make an eternal separation between believers and unbelievers. His kingdom shall have no end.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph E

Glossary

Incarnation: God putting on our humanity. God becoming flesh.

Vicarious Atonement: Vicarious means serving in the place of someone else, substituting. Atonement means satisfying the legal and moral demands of an injured party, in this case, God.

Justification: To be declared righteous in the court of God. The gracious act of God whereby he acquits the repentant sinner of his sin and guilt, credits him with the righteousness of Christ, and looks upon him in Christ as though he had never sinned (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 79).

Millennium: The one thousand year reign of Christ on earth.

Introduction

The Apostles' Creed

The meaning of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed is given in Luther's Small Catechism:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, bought and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil — not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death — in order that I might be His own, live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; even as He is risen from the dead, and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 60).

Jesus Christ is the key to a correct understanding of the redemption God has provided and the Bible is the key to a correct understanding of Jesus Christ. *Christ alone* and *Scripture alone* are important truths that must be maintained. Holy Scripture is the only source and norm of the Christian faith and life. Not our opinions, or our traditions, or our experiences, but only Scripture is to be our canon in determining truth.

Paragraph E of the Statement of Faith examines who Jesus is, the purpose for which he came, and the works that he did and continues to do.

Definition of Chalcedon (451 AD)

The Council of Chalcedon assembled to address some errors regarding the person of Jesus that were creeping into the church. These errors concerned the human nature of Jesus, the divine nature of Jesus, and how those two natures could both be one person. The Council answered the questions by formulating this definition:

Therefore, following the holy Fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead; and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood, begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person or subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of

him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us (Bettenson, 1999, pp. 56-57).

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus asked this of his disciples in Matthew 16:13. Their answer was that he was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. That opinion was not unanimous during their day nor is it unanimous in ours.

Some today say that Jesus never actually lived, but that he is just a legendary figure from the past that has been idealized through story and myth. There are probably not too many who would believe this in its most blatant form, but more would believe it in more modest expressions.

Others say Jesus was a great teacher of the first century whose followers created stories about him that made him out to be something he himself never claimed to be.

We believe Jesus Christ to be God incarnate. He is true God and true man, the image of the invisible God.

True God and True Man

In John 1:1-14, John says that the Word became flesh. John identifies that Word as one who was in the beginning with God and who was God — meaning that this Word is separate from God and equal to God and is God. This Word became human (flesh) and lived among us. We know what God is like because this one came from the Father to make him known (see the discussion of John 1 in Chapter 2, The Trinity).

Jesus, the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), allows us to see what cannot be seen. No one has ever seen God, but Jesus makes him known (John 1:18). Jesus does this so completely, that he can say to his disciples, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well” (John 14:7). He followed that statement with another, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). This is how God wants us to know what he is like. God does not send us into nature to know him (although there are things of God that can be seen in nature), nor does he send us to our intelligence and reason to know him (although our reason is a helpful tool at times in coming to know God). Rather, God became human in Jesus of Nazareth so that we can know him. This is the place (person) where God has chosen to reveal himself most fully. If we want to find God, we know exactly where to look. If we want to know what God is like, we know exactly where to look.

The identity of Christ is also addressed in Hebrews 1:1-2:18. The writer begins by saying that in this present time, God speaks through a Son “whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:2-3). The Son is identified with the Father; Jesus is true God.

The author goes on to write about one who is of the same family as those he came to save. “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in

their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14). Jesus is fully human.

Jesus is the God/man in the fullest sense of the term. He is not part God, part man; he is fully God and fully man; complete God and complete man. Some false doctrines teach that Jesus is not really God or not truly man. The earliest heresies denied his humanity. The doctrine of the Trinity describes God as being three persons with one nature. The doctrine of the person of Christ describes him as one person with two natures.

In Christ, the human and divine natures were truly united. The God/man had two natures without mixing the two together, or confusing them, without any change of either and without separation of them.

Though Jesus is truly human, his human nature is different from other humans in one respect. The Bible tells us that Jesus was like us with a human nature like ours in every way (Hebrews 2:17) except for sin (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus had no sin nature, and he did not commit sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus is definitely unique. The mystery of the incarnation can never be explained by reason. It is one of the grand mysteries of divine revelation that Christians believe — and we believe it because God clearly teaches it in his Word.

The Purpose of the Incarnation

To accomplish our redemption

In Galatians 4:4-5, we are given one reason why God became man: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”

To redeem is to buy back or to set someone free by paying a ransom. Our enslavement and debt were to the Law; we needed to be set free from that bondage. There was no way that we could be freed from our condition without the action of a redeemer. Jesus became that redeemer.

The *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism* presents three aspects of redemption:

- 1) The *how* of redemption: “Christ has redeemed me by paying for my sins with His holy and precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death; and by fulfilling the law in my place by His perfect life and complete obedience” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 65).
- 2) The *result* of redemption: “Jesus Christ has bought and freed me from the power of sin, death, and Satan, and has made me an heir of eternal life” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 66).
- 3) The *purpose* of redemption: “Christ has redeemed me in order that I might belong to Him, be a citizen in His Kingdom, and serve Him perfectly and happily without guilt, forever” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 68).

God became human for our redemption.

To accomplish our justification

“Justification is the gracious act of God by which He, for Christ’s sake, acquits me (declares me not guilty), a repentant and believing sinner of my sin and guilt, credits me with Christ’s righteousness, and looks upon me, in Christ, as though I had never sinned” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 79).

Justification, then, involves three activities on the part of God:

- 1) *Acquittal*. Acquittal is a judicial declaration that someone is not guilty. The shocking thing about this declaration is that God acquits sinners, who are in fact guilty. God does not, in justification, make someone innocent; God declares them — by his grace — to be innocent. He does this because another — Christ — has taken the guilt (Isaiah 53:5-6).
- 2) *Crediting righteousness*. Sin is not credited to the sinner, but quite the opposite — God graciously credits Christ’s righteousness to the sinner. The Apostle Paul illustrates this with the example of Abraham who “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3). Paul then describes God as one who “gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were” (Romans 4:17). That is an apt description of justification — “calling things that are not as though they were.”
- 3) *Seeing sinners “in Christ.”* God graciously looks on the sinner, in Christ, as though he or she had never sinned. “In Christ” is an important phrase. Being “in Christ” is possible because Christ came to be one of us so that we can be in him.

So God became human for our justification.

To establish his kingdom

God also became human to establish his kingdom among people. This has several dimensions. By the petition “thy kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus is teaching us to pray that his kingdom would come to us and to others. There is the sense that the kingdom comes when God gives us his Word and his Holy Spirit and we believe in the Son. The kingdom is the sphere where God rules and his law is obeyed and his values are prized. It is the place where his ideals are adopted and practiced. This kingdom comes to and among us imperfectly at best in this life, but one day will come fully and powerfully.

The Work That He Was Given To Do

Perfect obedience

For our salvation to be accomplished, it was necessary for someone acting on our behalf to live a life of perfect obedience to God. Jesus, as our savior, had to live that perfect life in our place. This is one of the reasons that he had to be fully human. He had to fully love God with all of his heart, and soul, and mind,

and strength; he had to love his neighbor as himself.

When we are credited with the righteousness of Christ in justification, it is the righteousness of a life lived in total submission, love, and obedience to the Father. Jesus lived a sinless life by doing all of the things that are commanded and none of the things that are prohibited by the Law of God.

Theologians speak of Jesus’ active and passive obedience. Active obedience describes the righteous life that he lived for us. Jesus did what he was supposed to do.

Passive obedience describes the punishment he endured on our behalf, for our sins. He endured what was necessary to accomplish our salvation.

Substitutionary death

The term *vicarious atonement* is used to express this biblical truth. This is how it works:

- 1) God, according to his perfect justice, demands of all people perfect obedience to his Law, and his wrath is upon all those who do not fulfill it (Galatians 3:10).
- 2) Christ, by his perfect obedience, satisfied the demands of divine justice in our place.
- 3) Through Christ’s satisfaction of the Law, all people were reconciled to God, which means God is no longer angry with sinners and no longer charges them with their sins, but will graciously forgive all their sins (Romans 5:10).

We believe that Jesus took the full responsibility to pay the debt that sinners owe God for their rebellion against him. We believe that the sins of the whole world were laid on his back and that he carried them to his death. This means nothing else needs to be done to finish or complete the work of atonement. Jesus finished it completely 2000 years ago on a hill outside of Jerusalem. When John the Baptist said, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29), he recognized in Jesus the one sacrifice for sins that would be sufficient for every sin ever committed, past, present, and future.

Resurrection from the dead

We believe that Jesus was raised from the dead in the body in which he was crucified. The accounts of his post-resurrection appearances give us some insight into what this means. Jesus showed the disciples his hands and side; the scars of his death remained (John 20:20). He had flesh and bones and ate food (Luke 24:39-43). However, after the resurrection, that body was also changed. When all the doors were locked, Jesus came into the room and stood among them (John 20:19).

From this we learn that our new resurrection bodies will be somewhat like the one we have now (Jesus was recognizable after the resurrection), but they will not have the limitations that we experience now with our “weak” bodies (Jesus was able to go anywhere, including through locked doors, very quickly). Our new bodies will be appropriate to the new reality that we will enjoy in the new heaven and the new earth.

Religious and philosophical traditions that diminish the value of the material world also diminish the importance of the bodily resurrection. In our resurrection, we will be physical, individual persons with bodies that are like Jesus' glorious body (Philippians 3:21).

The core of Paul's preaching is the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of the risen Christ to hundreds of people. He wrote that this was "the gospel I preached to you" (1 Corinthians 15:1). It was what he had received and what he passed on to the church (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The resurrection is not a later addition to the Gospel, but is rather an essential part of it.

How essential is the resurrection to the Gospel? If Christ has not been raised, then no one will be raised (see 1 Corinthians 15:12-17). Furthermore, if Christ has not been raised, then redemption and justification have not been accomplished either (see 1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

Paul says that the resurrection is part of the reversal of the curse of sin. Adam's sin brought physical death along with spiritual death. Jesus' resurrection brings physical life along with spiritual life.

Ascension into heaven

Forty days after his resurrection, our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. Luke 24:50-52 and Acts 1:9-11 record eyewitness accounts of his ascension. The significance of His public ascension is that it is the public and triumphant certification of Jesus as the savior of the world; it is his return to heaven after successfully completing his mission on earth, and it is the assurance that all believers shall follow Christ into heaven.

Session at the right hand of the Father

In heaven, Christ is seated at the right hand of God. This is not so much a *place* as it is a *position*. Christ is seated as our king and rules his kingdom in a most glorious and gracious way (Ephesians 1:20-22; 1 Peter 3:22). The position Jesus holds at the right hand of God does not exclude him from being present with us "always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). The Formula of Concord says it this way:

He is present with his church and community on earth as mediator, head, king, and high priest... He is present not only according to his deity, but also according to and with his assumed human nature, according to which he is our brother (Tappert, 1959, p. 607).

Our high priest Jesus has made full satisfaction for all our sins by his life and death. He offered himself as the sacrifice for our sins — he is both the one who offers the offering and the offering itself.

As our high priest, Jesus prays for us. He is the only mediator between God and us. What an encouragement this is for us to remember that Jesus, the beloved of the Father, is praying to the Father for us! Jesus intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father. John 17 records Jesus' prayer on the night before he died. The Church has long understood this prayer to be indicative of Jesus' prayers for the Church at the right hand of the Father. At the right hand of the Father, Jesus prays for the Church's protection (John 17:11-12), joy (17:13),

sanctification (17:17), unity (17:11, 21, 23), and mission (17:20, 23). It is a great comfort to know that Christ is alive, seated at the right hand of the Father, and praying for us (Hebrews 7:25). Therefore, we are secure.

Second coming

Christ's second coming is a certainty. The first century Church seemed to expect Jesus' return at any moment. Jesus had instructed the disciples to be alert and ready, to watch and pray (Mark 13:1-37).

The signs of Jesus' coming are intended to alert us to his return. The signs serve as a warning and as an encouragement: To remind us that Christ will return to judge all people; to incite believers to watchfulness and prayer because our natural attachment to this world may cause us to overlook or to forget about the hope of heaven and become careless in our daily life; and to remind us that we are to be faithful stewards until he comes.

The manner of his coming is taught in Mark 13:26 and also in Acts 1:11, where the angels announced to the apostles that Jesus would come back in the same way his followers had seen him leave: personally, bodily, and visibly.

Establishment of millennial kingdom

The *millennium* is the thousand-year reign of Christ. There are three understandings of the millennium:

- 1) Pre-millennialists believe that Jesus will return before the millennium. During the millennium, Jesus will rule the earth from a throne on earth. Pre-millennialists can be subdivided into three groups: Pre-tribulationists, who believe that Jesus will come before the seven-year tribulation; Mid-tribulationists, who believe Jesus will come at some point during the tribulation; and Post-tribulationists, who believe Jesus will come after the tribulation.
- 2) Post-millennialists believe that Jesus will return after the millennium. This position holds that the rule of Jesus will be a golden age of the Gospel on earth in which the rule of Christ will be exercised through the Church.
- 3) Amillennialists do not believe that there is a literal thousand-year reign, but that the reign of Christ is in the Church.

The Church of the Lutheran Brethren treats the subject of the millennial kingdom as an open question. (See the CLB Position Paper on Eschatology, *Teaching About the Last Things*.)

Judgment

According to the Law, all people must appear before the judgment seat of God. According to the Gospel, believers will not be condemned (Matthew 25:32-34, 41; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 8:1).

If one rejects the concept of eternal punishment (hell) then the concept of eternal life (heaven) must also be discarded since both are placed together, side by side in the Scriptures (Matthew 25:46). The two eternal destinations are

equally true.

The endless agonies of the damned are described in unmistakable terms (Mark 9:43-49; Revelation 14:9-11). The sufferings of the body in hell will be extreme (Matthew 13:49-50; Luke 16:23-24), but there will also be in hell the terrors of a fully awakened conscience with the real sense of God's wrath and eternal condemnation.

The purpose of revealing this punishment is to warn us against unbelief and false security and to move us to seek salvation and righteousness in Christ alone. All teachers who deny the eternal punishment of the wicked are not merciful but cruel, false prophets because they do not warn the sinner against his terrible doom. God never intended that any person go to hell; rather he wills that all people repent and believe in Jesus (1 Timothy 2:3-4). In fact, God has made provision in Christ for all people to go to heaven, but those who refuse his invitation and insist on going to hell are not forced into heaven.

There is an everlasting life in glory and bliss for all believers in Christ. This wonderful truth is beyond human understanding; it is another of the hidden mysteries of God to which all believers can look forward (1 Corinthians 2:9).

How do the Scriptures describe eternal life? We will see Jesus face to face; we will desire no greater happiness than that of seeing God who is the source of all perfect enjoyment. There will be no spiritual foes to interfere with our bliss. We will experience a never-ending reception of incomprehensible blessings. There will be a complete absence of sin and all causes of sin. There will be no more death, sickness, pain or limitations (Revelation 21:1-4). We will have a will that is in harmony with God's will, and enjoy complete security, peace and joy (John 16:22; 1 Corinthians 13:10; Ephesians 5:27). In heaven we will experience perfect relationships, wonderful conversations and delightful communication with everyone including the angels. There will be complete and perfect fulfillment that shall never end.

As the truth of eternal punishment warns us against unbelief and false security, so the truth of eternal life encourages us to remain in faith and sustains us in following Christ. Martin Luther said that a truly Christian life is impossible without constant consideration of the sure hope of eternal life.

No tribulation, suffering or hardship will be comparable to the glory of heaven (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, 16-18), so, dear brothers and sisters, keep on keeping on, continue to trust in Christ, for one day we will all be home together in heaven.

Everlasting reign

He shall reign forever and ever. And of his kingdom there shall be no end. The kingdom that is coming will be ruled by a shepherd king who is described for us in Psalm 23 and John 10:1-18. We are so accustomed to kings who rule for their own benefit that we can hardly imagine a king who rules for the benefit of those ruled. We think of kings as people who make demands and who dole out restrictions and impose hardship. It is difficult for us to imagine a king whose priority is caring for his subjects.

We also have a sense that governments are fatally flawed. Even when they have good intentions, they do not have the ability to carry them out.

We can't imagine a government that has good intentions and the capacity to follow through effectively. What will it be like to live in a kingdom where the government is all-wise, all-compassionate and all-powerful?

Study Questions

- 1) Some people may be disappointed when they hear they have been credited with the righteousness of Christ. What might be the cause of that disappointment?
- 2) How is it possible and how is it just to offer, without charge, the gift of salvation to all people in all places?
- 3) How would you explain this statement? “There are people in hell whose sins have been forgiven.”
- 4) If Jesus is praying for us, what does that suggest to us about the need for prayer, the purpose of prayer, and the value of prayer?
- 5) How does a Christian view of the resurrection differ from a Buddhist view of eternal life?

CHAPTER 6: THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is a divine person eternally one with the Father and with the Son. Through the Word of God He convicts people of sin, persuades them to confess their sinfulness to God and calls them to faith through the Gospel. He regenerates, sanctifies, and preserves believers in the one true faith. He comforts, guides, equips, directs, and empowers the church to fulfill the great commission.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph F

Glossary

Antinomian: A person who believes that the Law serves no useful purpose in the Christian life; someone who rejects law. The word comes from *anti*, meaning against, and *nomos*, which is Greek for law.

Apostasy: A biblical concept that generally refers to those who fall away from belief in God.

Gnostic: See glossary for chapter 2, The Trinity.

Preservation: “That gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which He, through the Word of God and the Lord’s Supper, feeds and strengthens my spiritual life, and gives me instruction, guidance, correction and comfort, keeping me in God’s grace” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 85).

Regeneration: Sometimes called the new birth, regeneration “is the gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which He, because He has come to live in my heart, renews the image of God in me, and creates a new spiritual being” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 81).

Sanctification: “The gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which He daily renews me more and more in the image of God through the Word and Sacraments” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 84).

Introduction

When Zerubbabel was faced with the task of rebuilding the temple, he did not have the resources that David and Solomon had when they originally built it. God’s Word to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit” (Zechariah 4:6). This is still true as God builds the temple today.

The body of believers is the place where God lives by his Spirit, according to Ephesians 2:22. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul writes, you (plural) are God’s temple (singular) and God’s Spirit lives in you.

Paragraph F of the Statement of Faith addresses the question of how God builds this temple. The answer is “by his Spirit.” We will examine that here. We will look at the identity of Holy Spirit, the Spirit’s role in salvation and sanctification, and the Spirit’s work in the Church. (See also chapter 2, The Trinity.)

Montanism was a late second century reaction against formalism and human organization in the Church, calling for more reliance upon the Holy Spirit. (Imagine the Church only 80 years after the time of the Apostles. It was still an underground movement, and yet it already needed renewal). The Montanists believed that the church was getting too structured and worldly. Adherents of a prophetic movement called *the New Prophecy*, they believed in continuous inspiration — that God spoke through their leader Montanus just as he had spoken through Paul and the other apostles (Wright, 1984, p. 732).

Some say Montanus started the movement because he lusted for leadership. Others say he had a craving for more immediate spiritual contact with God. Montanus claimed that he himself was the manifestation of the Paraclete promised by Jesus in John 14. (In fact, the promised Paraclete — variously translated as Counselor, Comforter, or Helper — is the Holy Spirit.)

The greater things that Jesus said would be accomplished by those who had faith in him (John 14:12) were, according to Montanus, “more demanding standards of discipline required of spiritual Christians, such as the denial of remarriage to the widowed and of postbaptismal forgiveness for serious sins” (Wright, 1984, p. 733). In his effort to call the Church back to its first love, Montanus ordered specific behaviors of his followers. Those who obeyed were considered to be spiritual. Those who disobeyed were not considered to be true Christians.

Montanus declared that the end of the world was at hand and predicted the imminent descent of the New Jerusalem in a small town in Phrygia (modern Turkey) (Heick, 1965, p. 78f).

Instead of trying to take books out of the Bible like Marcion, Montanus wanted to add additional, direct revelations to it. In view of this, Christians gathered in many places to discuss the matter. Their conclusion was to reject the heresy and expel the Montanists from the Church.

Montanists agreed with the Church on the doctrine of God the Father as the creator of all things and they were apparently orthodox in their doctrine of Christ, but they were judged to have a spirit of false prophecy, about which Christ warned. Many sincere believers were pulled into this movement. Tertullian, one of the Church fathers, the person who coined the word *Trinity*

as a way of talking about who God is, became a Montanist (Bettenson, 1999, p. 78).

The Gnostics emphasized a secret, hidden knowledge that was accessible only to insiders. Christian growth meant becoming intellectually and philosophically superior. They eliminated from the Bible those things that conflicted with this approach. The best Christians were “in the know.” The Montanists emphasized the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit as being of equal authority with the Scriptures. Their ideas threatened the unique authority of Scripture by adding to it. The true Christians were those who adhered to the stricter obedience the new prophets demanded.

In either case, the people who followed these ideas and teachers were departing from the Scriptures as the final authoritative guide for faith and conduct. This led in some cases to antinomianism and in other cases to asceticism. Both approaches are in jeopardy of the curse in Revelation 22:18-19, regarding adding to or taking away from the words of “this book.”

In our time, it is not uncommon for people to ignore sections of Scripture or to look for further revelations beyond those already given. Is this not an insult to God the Holy Spirit who inspired and illumines and works through the Scriptures? Is it not an offense to Christ who comes to us “in, with, and under” the Scriptures? (See chapter 7 for more information on the phrase “in, with, and under.”)

While we should not presume to limit the ways God will work in our lives and in our world, neither should we ignore the ways in which he has promised he will work.

During the Protestant Reformation, the “Zwickau prophets” adopted many of the ideas of Montanus. As Solomon said, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

God the Holy Spirit is a Divine Person

As the Church began to think about the person and work of God the Holy Spirit, the first questions it faced were about his deity and personality. Some believed the Holy Spirit was inferior in his divine nature to God the Father and God the Son. In this way, God the Holy Spirit became a lesser god and polytheism invaded Christian thinking. Others denied his personality and talked about the Holy Spirit as a divine force or power. We believe that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and is not created, not made, but co-eternal, co-equal, and one with the Father and the Son.

The Holy Spirit is divine

God the Holy Spirit is true God (see also chapter 2, The Trinity). In the history of the Church, the deity of the Holy Spirit has generally been accepted where his personal nature has been accepted. One exception to that general rule was Arius, who mostly focused on the person of Christ (see discussion in chapter 2). “Arius and his followers held that the Holy Spirit was created by the Son” (Thiessen, 1979, p. 97). In Arius’ view, there was apparently a hierarchy of deities with the Father as supreme, followed by the Son, and lastly the Holy

Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity states that the three persons are one in nature and power and deity; there is no hierarchy or difference. There are three persons who should not be confused with each other and there is one essence that cannot be divided. Therefore, while the Holy Spirit is not the Father and is not the Son, the Spirit is a divine person co-equal to and of the same essence with Father and Son.

This essential deity of the Spirit can be seen by noting his divine attributes: his eternity (Hebrews 9:14), his omnipresence (Psalm 139:7-10), his omniscience (1 Corinthians 2:10-12).

The deity of the Spirit can also be established by noting his divine works: creation (Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4) and regeneration (John 3:5; Titus 3:5).

Jesus spoke of the Spirit when he said, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16-17). The Spirit is identified as coequal with the Son, called “another Counselor” by which Jesus means, “one like me.”

These attributes and works are those of God. They reveal the equality of deity between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They reveal the fact that the essential deity of the Holy Spirit is identical to that of the Father and the Son.

The deity of the Holy Spirit is seen in Acts 5:3-4, where we find the account of Ananias and Sapphira. They are said to be lying to the Holy Spirit and lying to God in parallel sentences.

The Holy Spirit is a person

The personality of the Holy Spirit is seen in the fact that he relates: to people in fellowship (2 Corinthians 13:14), to the Father and the Son in revelation (John 16:13-15), and to the world in conviction (John 16:8).

The personality of the Holy Spirit can be seen in the fact that personal characteristics are attributed to him: he knows (1 Corinthians 2:11), he grieves (Ephesians 4:30), and he wills (1 Corinthians 12:11).

His personal identity is seen as he is named as a separate person from Father and Son: in the baptismal formula (Matthew 28:19), in the apostolic benediction (2 Corinthians 13:14), and in Peter’s greeting to the Church (1 Peter 1:2). We see the Spirit at work as a distinct person in the baptism of Jesus. The Father speaks from heaven about Jesus the Son who has just come up out of the water, and the Spirit — in the form of a dove — rests on Jesus. In this event we see three persons doing three different things at the same time: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is eternally one with Father and Son

There are three persons who exist in unity eternally. Without beginning or end, they are Almighty God (not almighty gods) to be worshipped and served. The Spirit is one of those three.

When we refer to the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, there is no intention of saying that he is any less God, or inferior to the Father and Son.

The Holy Spirit is Lord God Almighty (but there are not three lords, but one Lord, not three gods, but one God, and not three almighties, but one Almighty).

The Holy Spirit Works Salvation

How does God call people into fellowship with himself?

The third article of the Apostles' Creed is about the Holy Spirit. According to the Small Catechism, this is the meaning of the third article:

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 through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith, just as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith, in which Christian church He daily forgives abundantly all my sins, and the sins of all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will grant everlasting life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 75).

By his work of redemption, Jesus Christ won eternal salvation for all people. But the work that Jesus finished needs to be delivered to people so that they will benefit from it. It is the Holy Spirit who offers and gives salvation gifts to people. The Spirit does this work through the Word of God. This Word comes in many forms: reading, preaching, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the mutual conversation of Christians with each other.

It wouldn't be right to say that God cannot give his salvation gifts to people in any other way than through the Word — God can do anything he chooses to do. Few of us are willing to say that God has never given his gifts apart from the Word; we don't have absolute knowledge. What we do believe is that God has chosen to do his work through the Word. So while God may work in other ways, he has promised to work through the Word. It is a remarkable reality that God has chosen to do his eternal work through the actions of human beings. Through human language and human writing and speaking, God is at work doing superhuman things. As we speak the Word of God and read the Word of God, the Holy Spirit is at work through our speaking and reading.

The Spirit convicts of sin through the Law

The Holy Spirit convicts us that we are lost in our sin.

The Law reveals God's righteousness and his will. It tells us what we should think and do and say and feel. The Law also threatens Law-breakers with punishment.

Antinomianism is an idea that has appeared with varying degrees of enthusiasm at different times in the history of the Church. It taught that the Law was totally unnecessary to convict of sin or to coach behavior in the life of the believer.

Paul may have been falsely accused of antinomianism. Marcion the Gnostic was antinomian; there were people during the Reformation era who

were antinomians.

We believe the law has continuing application in the work of the Holy Spirit to build the new temple of God, the Church, in this age. We talk about three uses of the Law of God. The Law serves:

(1) not only to maintain external discipline and decency against dissolute and disobedient people, (2) and to bring people to a knowledge of their sin through the law, (3) but those who have been born anew through the Holy Spirit, who have been converted to the Lord and from whom the veil of Moses has been taken away, learn from the law to live and walk in the law (Tappert, 1959, p. 563-564).

The second use of the law is to bring people to conviction of sin. This is the work of God the Holy Spirit and is essential if someone is to see his or her need for Christ as Savior. If someone is not lost, he or she doesn't need to be found. If someone is not in trouble, that one doesn't need to be rescued. If someone is not dead, that one doesn't need to be made alive. The law shows us our sinful situation and our need for a Savior.

Through the preaching of the Law, a person becomes aware of his or her lost and sinful condition. The sinner also becomes aware of the fact that his or her sin carries the condemnation of eternal punishment.

No one will seek a savior until he or she is aware of his or her need. The work of the Law, whether written on the heart, revealed in nature, or preached from the Word, must drive the sinner to despair in order for the sinner to be made ready for salvation.

The Holy Spirit also convicts us that we are guilty in our sin.

The Law is the way in which the Holy Spirit works conviction of sin. The word *convict*, as translated by the NIV in John 16:8, "is a legal term that means to pronounce a judicial verdict by which the guilt of the culprit at the bar of justice is defined and fixed. The Spirit does not merely accuse people of sin, he brings to them an inescapable sense of guilt so that they realize their shame and helplessness before God" (Tenney, 1981, p. 157).

The word translated *convict* is the Greek word *elegko* and it means "to state that someone has done wrong, with the implication that there is adequate proof of such wrongdoing" (Louw, 1988, p. 436). Compare Matthew 18:15 where Jesus says, "Go and show him his fault."

When the Commandments say, "You shall..." or "You shall not..." this does not mean God's Law tells us to "do the best you can." Furthermore, if one part of the Law is violated, the violator is guilty of violating the whole Law (James 2:10). An example of this — maybe a simplistic one — is an automobile tire. You may have only one hole in the tire, but the whole tire is flat. If you have violated the Law, even if only in one point, the whole Law has been broken. On these grounds, the Spirit shuts every mouth, finds each person accountable to God, and then makes them look at their guilt. "Through the law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:20b).

The Spirit persuades confession upon conviction of sin

As the Holy Spirit works through the Law, a person also becomes aware

of the specific violation of the Law that brings guilt. People who have a general sense of guilt may have difficulty accepting forgiveness. Sometimes this is because there is no ability or willingness to name the specific sin. The Law puts a name on sin. When we are convicted specifically so we can name it in confession, we can receive forgiveness for that sin. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Leviticus 5:5 says, “When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned.” Later we read, in Leviticus 26:40-42, “But if they will confess their sins... I will remember my covenant...” The worship picture painted in the book of Leviticus shows the people always beginning their worship with confession of sin by the practice of laying hands on the sacrificial animal. In effect they are saying, “What now happens to this animal is what I deserve for my sins.”

Luke records a story Jesus told of a tax collector who came to the temple to pray. “He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’” (Luke 18:13). Jesus says that this tax collector went home justified before God.

By showing us our guilt, the Holy Spirit moves us to come to God in confession. But also by showing us our savior, the Holy Spirit moves us to come to God in confession.

Peter and Judas both went out and were filled with remorse over their denial and betrayal of Christ. Peter found forgiveness; Judas did not. What was the difference in these two men? Only from God’s perspective and understanding could we know for sure, but we see that Judas’ remorse led him to hopelessness, isolation and the kind of despair that drove him to suicide. Peter, for some reason, stayed with the disciples, met the risen Jesus, and heard the words of reconciliation and forgiveness. See Luke 22:31-32, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” See also John 13:27a, “As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.”

There is a kind of despair that is brought by the Holy Spirit that turns one to Christ. There is a kind of despair that is the work of Satan that turns one in on one’s self and leads to destruction. Consider 2 Corinthians 7:10, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”

When the Holy Spirit uncovers sin in your life and you know your guilt before God, do not make excuses or try to run away. Denial of sin will turn God into a relentless pursuer. Confession of guilt and the plea for mercy in the name of Jesus is the only safe place for the sinner.

By convicting of sin, the Spirit of God drives us to seek Christ in confession. He is the one who did “not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

The Spirit calls to faith through the Gospel

Pelagianism (see chapter 4) says that a person can turn from sin and toward God and be saved by one’s own strength. On the contrary, we believe, “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 through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me...” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 75).

Faith is created through the Gospel, which is the power of God for salvation. The Gospel comes to us in a number of ways, but always in the form of a Word. There is the Gospel Word that is read; there is the Gospel Word that is spoken; the Gospel Word can be dramatized; the Gospel Word is the sacramental Word (the water Word of baptism and bread and wine Word of the Lord’s Supper). (This *Word* terminology is used by Dr. Eugene Boe in *Friendship with God*.)

The Gospel is absolutely free — no hurdles, no strings attached, no prerequisites. Christ has accomplished everything necessary for salvation.

The Gospel is valid for everyone. It is to be announced to the ends of the earth. It is to be taught to all nations. It is to be witnessed around the world. It is to be preached until the end of time. (See John 1:29 and Luke 24:47.)

The Gospel is powerful. This Gospel word is able to accomplish regeneration (1 Peter 1:23-25). It is able to sanctify (John 17:17). It is able to bring people out of darkness into the light (2 Corinthians 4:6). It is able to create faith (Romans 10:17).

At the time of the Reformation, when the principle of Justification by Faith was the center of the debate, the definition of faith became very important. The kind of faith that saves is not bare intellectual knowledge. Intellectual awareness is important (“How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” Romans 10:14), but knowledge in itself does not save. Assent to the truth is also important, but it does not save. Just because I know that something is true and that it applies to me does not mean that I have put my faith in it. Saving faith is a sincere confidence of the heart in the grace of God offered in Christ Jesus. Sometimes this faith is weak; but it still saves, because the grace that it depends on is strong.

The Holy Spirit Works Sanctification

The Holy Spirit regenerates

This new spiritual being is sometimes called the new man, the new creation, or the new nature. In John 3:3-5, Jesus speaks of being born from above by means of water and the Spirit. In Titus 3:5, Paul speaks of the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 2:5, Paul speaks of those who were dead being made alive. In Ezekiel 36:25-27, God says he will sprinkle clean water on you and make you clean, give you a new heart — one of flesh, not stone — and put his Spirit in you. Peter says in 1 Peter 1:23-25:

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.” And this is the word that was preached to you.

Through the preaching of the Gospel, the imperishable seed conceives new life. This new life does not mean that afterwards we will never do any of the

things that we did before regeneration. What it does mean is that there is now a new life with a new standing before God because of Jesus. The old one is still there and needs to be put to death daily, but there is a new life rising daily with Christ, in Christ. The reformers used a phrase to describe this status saying that the Christian is simultaneously saint and sinner.

The Holy Spirit sanctifies

“Sanctification is the gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which He daily renews me more and more in the image of God through the Word and Sacraments” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 84). There is also a broader use of the term that includes the whole process of bringing the sinner to eternal life. It comes from the idea that to sanctify is to take something out of normal use and set it aside as belonging to God and for his use alone. It refers to something that has been made holy.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul uses sanctification in that broader sense when he speaks of people who had been immoral, greedy, crooks, but had been sanctified and justified “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” Here sanctification is spoken of as a completed act. Sanctification in the narrow sense, however, is a process that is incomplete until glory.

The narrow sense is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7. “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable... For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”

In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul is speaking of the narrower sense when he describes the results of the work of the Spirit in the believer’s life as being the fruit of the Spirit.

Sometimes, people believe that they are saved by grace, but that they remain saved and grow in sanctification by works. Paul’s epistle to the Galatians is an essay to the contrary. Read Galatians 5:2-6 and 3:1-5. Also see chapter 8, Eternal Salvation.

The Holy Spirit preserves

“Preservation is that gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which He, through the Word of God and the Lord’s Supper, feeds and strengthens my spiritual life, and gives me instruction, guidance, correction and comfort, keeping me in God’s grace” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 85).

Edward Koehler writes, “Man can destroy his life, but he can neither produce nor preserve it” (Koehler, 1971, p. 177). So we are dependent upon God to preserve us in faith, keep us in grace, and strengthen us. Philippians 1:6 says, “...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

He does this with the same means he uses to save us: Word and Sacrament. We read in 2 Timothy 3:14, “Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.” The intent is that the soul should be preserved in faith until the end. Peter writes to believers “who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last

time” (1 Peter 1:5). In 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 Paul says, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”

The danger of apostasy is real. But the Gospel is the power to persevere. You cannot stay saved by obedience, good works, or just wanting to, but only by the power of God. You must eat to stay alive; similarly, you must use the means of grace to stay spiritually strong and alive. To ignore them is to risk spiritual suicide.

The Law is preached to us to make sure we know the danger of apostasy. It is preached to us so that we do not depend on our own will power, our own works, or our own spirituality to persevere in faith. The warnings are intended to drive us to Christ where we find assurance.

We tell our children not to play in the street. We tell them that so that they won’t get injured, or worse. The Law is preached to us to warn us of danger. The Law tells us of the horrible consequences of sin. We would prefer if our children never went *near* the street. But until they realize the danger of the street, they will stand on the curb or see how close they can get to the street without actually being “in the street.” If they begin to become over-confident, they may think that they can play in the street and get off the street in time whenever they see an automobile approaching, and maybe they can. They will begin to be casual about the dangers of the street and feel safe as they run out from behind a parked car to retrieve an errant ball rolling into the street. People can become casual about sin and flirt with it. Think of the story of Bathsheba and King David — looking at a woman (I can handle this without sin), having dinner with a woman (I can handle this without sin), sleeping with a woman (is this really sin?), murdering her husband and causing other men to die as well (they were soldiers, it happens that “the sword devours one as well as another”). Note that the rationalization and denial get deeper and deeper.

The Law points out our sin to us and drives us in confession to the cross of Christ to receive forgiveness and cleansing. In confession and cleansing, we are renewed in Christ but we also grow in our sensitivity to sin and hatred of it. If we get to the place where we think nothing bad can happen or that we can handle it, we are in danger. It is when we are aware of danger and our weakness and hide in Christ that we find security.

The Holy Spirit Works Through the Church

The Church was created on Pentecost Sunday when God poured out the promised Holy Spirit on his people. The effect of the outpouring was an effective proclamation of Christ as the fulfillment of God’s salvation promises. Three thousand believed and were saved as the Spirit worked through the preached word and God began to build his temple corporately, worldwide.

Two errors in emphasis regarding the work of the Holy Spirit are, on the one side, to ignore him entirely. The Holy Spirit is what one writer has called the “bashful” person in the Holy Trinity; his work is to direct us away from himself and to Christ (John 16:13-15). Because of that, he has become in some

parts of Christianity the “missing” person in the Trinity. The other error is the opposite one in which the Holy Spirit has become the focus of the Church and Jesus fades into the background of church life.

The Holy Spirit comforts

As much as it is the work of the Holy Spirit to disturb and convict the complacent sinner of sin and guilt, it is also the work of the Holy Spirit to comfort the distressed sinner with the good news of forgiveness and life through the finished work of Christ. “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, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1-2). He comforts with the reminder of our identification with Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-11). He comforts with the reminder that God is reconciled to the world through Jesus Christ, not counting men’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19). He comforts with assurance of final victory and resurrection at Jesus’ return (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). He comforts with the assurance of his presence, living in the holy temple that is the people of God (Ephesians 2:19-22).

The Holy Spirit guides and directs

In the gospel of John, chapters 14-16, Jesus presents an extended discussion on the work of the coming Holy Spirit. The word “counselor” almost becomes a title. It is translated “comforter” in some translations. The work of this coming one, identified as the Spirit of truth (14:17), is to “teach you all things” (14:26) and “guide you into all truth” (16:13).

The completeness of the Spirit’s guidance is reflected in the use of the word “all.” Additionally, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 reads, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” As the Holy Spirit speaks through the Word he has inspired, he guides into all truth. The Word he has inspired is so useful that it has the ability to thoroughly equip for every good work.

We therefore say the Bible is our only source for faith and practice. It is in and through this Word of God that God the Holy Spirit guides and directs the Church today. We pray that God will lead, guide, and direct. We need also to pray that people will listen as God leads, guides, and directs in his Word.

People look for signs, for open and closed doors. They put out fleeces. They read books, go to seminars, listen to radio and watch television. But God the Holy Spirit, our counselor, speaks, teaches, trains, corrects, and rebukes through the Scriptures. Like the false prophets of Jeremiah’s day, we often hear people say, “God told me,” but they have not stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear his Word. They have not listened to his Word. They have gone somewhere else. “They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:16-18).

God the Holy Spirit is the believer’s guide. He has chosen to direct, teach, and train through the Scriptures. To be guided by the Spirit of God is to be a student of the Scriptures. To be directed by the Spirit of God is to be obedient

to the Scriptures. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16).

As we read in John 14-16, we will also see that the Spirit guides our Sunday gatherings so that the service is Christ-centered. John 16:14 says, “He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.” John 15:26 says, “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.” John 14:26 says, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” As we gather around Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit speaks of Christ through them.

The work of God the Holy Spirit is to direct our attention to Christ. He testifies of Christ, he reminds us of Christ, he brings glory to Christ. There is no sense in which this diminishes the equality of the Spirit within the Holy Trinity. The work of the Spirit is to direct us to Christ who is our savior, so we may know Christ and trust him. If our gathering begins to focus on the Spirit, we are doing what is contrary to the work of the Spirit. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is true God and is to be worshiped as one of the three persons in the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Spirit equips and empowers

On the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the believers were in Jerusalem. They had been commissioned as witnesses to Christ, sent to all nations, but they had been instructed to wait until they received “power from on high” (Luke 24:49). On the day of Pentecost, they received that power.

How were they going to be witnesses to all nations? On Pentecost, many nations were represented in Jerusalem. The nations came to the witnesses. How could they bear witness to the nations? The Holy Spirit enabled the believers to speak to each visitor in his or her native tongue. Believers were supernaturally equipped by the Holy Spirit to do the work of speaking good news to the lost.

Not only were they equipped to speak the Word of God, but they were also empowered by the Word of God. Peter said, “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). The Gospel is the power of God to create new life; it is also the power of God to sustain life. We are empowered for ministry by the Holy Spirit as he works through the Gospel. Paul wrote, “Therefore...in view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies...” (Romans 12:1). It is because of God’s mercy that we work and witness. We are empowered by the Gospel to serve. Peter added, as he talked about Christian virtues and values, “If anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins” (2 Peter 1:9). The empowerment for developing Christian character is given by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.

The church is still the way in which “the manifold wisdom of God [is being] made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 3:10). God accomplishes this by saving sinners as a demonstration of his grace (1 Timothy 1:12-17). Upon saving them, God incorporates them into his temple, the Church.

In this Church, “to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). These gifts of the Spirit are the ways in which the Spirit empowers and equips the Church to fulfill the great commission.

The purpose of the gifts is for the common good, “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13).

These gifts are the enabling of the Spirit, distributed by the Spirit for the growth of the Church. They are not given as a reward for special service; they are gifts of grace. They are not given for personal enrichment, but for the good of the Church. There is no question that a person is enriched when gifted by the Spirit, but that is not the purpose of the gift, according to Scripture. The gifts are not really given to individuals, but to the Church. So when Paul writes, “Desire the greater gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31), he is probably not directing individuals to seek a greater gift than the next Christian. Rather, he is more likely instructing the Church to ask God that the greater gifts be given to the Church by gifting individuals.

People usually ask, “How do I know what gift has been given to me?” Many people do not see themselves as being gifted. The discovery begins with knowing what the various, possible gifts are; they are listed in the Scriptures cited above. They are basically broken down into three categories: 1) leadership gifts, 2) word gifts, and 3) service gifts. Once the possibilities are introduced and understood, it is appropriate to ask: 1) which of these activities are enjoyable; and 2) which have been practiced successfully? These are good indicators of a person’s area of giftedness.

It is important to recognize the distinction between gift and role. Someone might be gifted as an evangelist; does that mean that he or she is not responsible for giving to support the work of the Church? On the other hand, if someone is gifted in the area of giving, does that relieve him or her of the responsibility to be a witness? If someone is gifted as an administrator, does that mean he or she does not have to be a teacher?

The Bible calls each of us to be witnesses; each of us is given opportunity to support the ministries of the Church financially; each of us is included in the great commission to “make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). God the Holy Spirit, in his sovereignty, has seen fit to specially enable each believer with a specific area of giftedness for the good of the whole body.

Here are seven basic concepts regarding spiritual gifts:

- 1) A spiritual gift is a special ability given to each believer by the Holy Spirit, who thus equips and moves members of the Church to serve in special ways for Christ and his kingdom (Ephesians 4:7-8, 11-13; 1 Corinthians 12:8-11).
- 2) Spiritual gifts are given to each believer without exception (1 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Peter 4:10).
- 3) Spiritual gifts are gifts of God’s grace; they are not earned or worked for (Ephesians 4:7; Romans 12:6; 1 Peter 4:10).

- 4) The Spirit gives many different gifts, providing for a rich diversity of ministry in the Church (1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28; Romans 12:6-8).
- 5) Spiritual gifts are intended to be employed for the benefit of others (1 Corinthians 12:7b, 25; Romans 12:6; Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Peter 4:10).
- 6) The members of the Church are parts of the body of Christ and therefore belong to one another (1 Corinthians 12:13-14, 27; Romans 12:5).
- 7) Gifts must always be used in love. Without love they are useless (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

The Holy Spirit empowers the Church to fulfill the great commission

Matthew 28:18-20 is the most familiar expression of the great commission (others are found in Luke 24:45-49, John 20:21, and Acts 1:8). Matthew’s record of one of those events takes place on a mountain in Galilee where the eleven saw Jesus and “they worshiped him; but some doubted” (28:17).

The great commission is to make disciples of all nations by going, baptizing, and teaching. The one giving this commission has been given all authority and he promises his presence until the end of the age.

The making of disciples needs to be understood as a process, one that continues in a person up until the time that the person dies. It seems that the New Testament at times uses the word *disciple* to include both believers and also some who are not yet believers. In John 6:64, Jesus said to his disciples, “Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” On the night he was betrayed, Jesus was meeting with his disciples in the upper room. One of the last things that Jesus said to them before his final prayer was, “You believe at last!” (John 16:31). At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, after the miracle of turning water to wine at the wedding in Cana, John records that “his disciples put their faith in him” (John 2:11).

It seems that believing is also a process. Faith grows from believing in a miracle worker to believing that Jesus has come from God. There is a need for those who are in this process to continue receiving the work of the Spirit, in hearing the words of Christ, to nurture and grow faith in Christ in us. Believing and discipleship are pilgrimages that will not be complete until we are perfected in glory.

Some have promoted an understanding of the great commission that divides it into three parts: pre-evangelism, evangelism, and discipleship. This model restricts discipleship to those who are believers. While this model may be helpful in some cases, it isn’t consistent with the way the New Testament uses the term disciple.

A disciple is someone who follows and learns. For many, that process is only a pre-faith experience. Jesus called people to follow him, but apparently following did not equal faith in every case. We aren’t really sure when Jesus’ twelve disciples came to faith. There are many points at which it says, “they believed,” but often it seems that their faith may have been something other than saving faith as we understand saving faith.

To fulfill the great commission today, we probably ought to reexamine the Gospel model of calling people to follow Christ. There are a couple of good reasons for this: 1) it seems consistent with the biblical record, and 2) it is more likely that this will be received in the 21st century culture.

There was a time when North American society generally understood Christianity. Most people probably identified with a church in some way. Many of the issues around faith in Christ and eternal salvation were familiar to the majority of the North American public. Nominal Christianity was a problem. Many people were Christian in name only. There was a need to call people to living faith and there was some value in identifying the difference between those sheep who were in the fold and those who were outside the fold. The model of the lifeboat could be used to talk about the need to throw out the lifeline and rescue the perishing. Those who were in the boat needed to help others who were drowning to get into the boat. People knew the issues. It was simply a matter of yielding to the Gospel.

Some would say that we now live in a post-Christian era. By that, they mean that Christianity is not generally known and understood like it was fifty or one hundred years ago. We also live in a time when making judgments about other people is not well received. We live in a time when people don't like someone giving them simple answers to difficult questions. Easy answers belittle the gravity of the problem and often the easy answers don't work anyway. To use the lifeboat illustration, it seems arrogant today to say, "We are on the inside, and we will help you become one of the insiders, too." (Additionally, there is something rather smug about being in the boat that lends itself rather easily to complacent self-righteousness.)

Discipleship as a process invites people to come with us as we follow Christ. It invites people to listen and watch and learn along with us. It doesn't imply that we have arrived; we too are on a journey. It doesn't focus so much on who is in and who is out as much as it focuses on the direction one is going. It doesn't have the burden of having to answer all the questions people ask. It allows us to say with Philip, "Come and see" (John 1:46). It doesn't allow us the temptation to complacency, because we recognize that being a disciple is a process that needs to be continued each day. Each day we need to be converted — to turn away from the temptation to go our own way and turn to follow Christ. Rick Richardson writes:

Evangelism is about helping people belong so that they come to believe. Most people today do not "decide" to believe. In community they "discover" that they believe, and then they decide to affirm that publicly and to follow Christ intentionally (Richardson, 2000, p. 100).

Study Questions

- 1) What is the difference between the convicting work of the Spirit and the accusing work of Satan? How would you know the difference?
- 2) Is confession of sin an act of faith?
- 3) What comes first: regeneration, faith, forgiveness or repentance?
- 4) What is the connection between the baptism of the Spirit and our baptism with water?

CHAPTER 7: THE MEANS OF GRACE

The knowledge and benefit of Christ's redemption from sin is brought to the human race through the means of grace, namely the Word and the sacraments.

- a. *Through the Word of the Law God brings sinners to know their lost condition and to repent. Through the Word of the Gospel He brings sinners to believe in Jesus Christ, to be justified, to enter the process of sanctification, and to have eternal life. This occurs as the Holy Spirit awakens them to see their sin, convicts them of their guilt of sin, and calls them to repent and believe, inviting and enabling them to accept God's grace in Christ. Each one who thus believes is instantly forgiven and credited with Christ's righteousness. The Word then teaches and guides the believer to lead a godly life.*
- b. *In the Sacrament of Baptism, God offers the benefits of Christ's redemption to all people and graciously bestows the washing of regeneration and newness of life to all who believe. God calls the baptized person to live in daily repentance, that is, in sorrow for sin, in turning from sin, and in personal faith in the forgiveness of sin obtained by Christ. By grace we are daily given the power to overcome sinful desires and live a new life in Christ. Those who do not continue to live in God's grace need to be brought again to repentance and faith through the Law and Gospel.*

Because the sinfulness of human nature passes on from generation to generation and the promise of God's grace includes little children, we baptize infants, who become members of Christ's believing church through baptism. These children need to come to know that they are sinners with a sinful nature that opposes God. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, they need to confess their sinfulness and yield to God; and possess for themselves forgiveness of their sin through Jesus Christ, as they are led from the faith received in infant baptism into a clear conscious personal faith in Christ as their Lord and Savior and being assured of salvation, rely solely on the finished work of Christ, and the power of the Gospel to live as children of God.
- c. *In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, Christ gives to the communicants His body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine. He declares the forgiveness of sin to all believers, and strengthens their faith.*

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph G

Glossary

Gospel: Those words of God that tell us what God has done for us in Christ.

Law: Those words of God that tell us what we ought to do and ought not to do.

Means of Grace: The ways in which God reveals, offers, conveys, confers, imparts and gives to human beings the benefits earned for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The means of grace are the Gospel, the Lord's Supper, and baptism.

Sacrament: The visible Word. We speak of sacraments as those acts that Christ has commanded, which employ visible elements and provide invisible gifts of grace, such as forgiveness of sins. "A Sacrament is a holy act, instituted by Christ, in which by visible means, He gives and confirms His invisible grace" (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 123).

Introduction

The benefit of Christ's redemption from sin is described in the fifth paragraph of the CLB Statement of Faith. The Bible tells us that the results of Christ's redemption are incredibly far reaching.

We read in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." This is a broad, magnificent statement indicating the universal scope of Jesus' work. This is consistent with other statements in the Bible. John the Baptist introduced Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). John the disciple declared Jesus to be "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

By his death Jesus Christ atoned for all sins ever committed by humanity: past, present, and future. There is no human sin for which Christ has not already borne the punishment. God no longer counts humanity's sins against us. No wonder they call it good news.

The knowledge and benefit of Christ's redemption from sin

Do all people receive benefit from what Christ has accomplished? How does anyone receive the benefits of what Christ has accomplished?

Consider the story of the sower, the seed, and the soils from Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23. The sower has enough seed to plant the entire field. There is nothing wrong with the seed. But it isn't growing in the field and bearing fruit, because it hasn't been scattered in the field. Christ has accomplished redemption for all people, but the benefits of Christ's redemption need to be given and received.

To gain *knowledge* is to be informed or made aware of something. We come to know about Christ's redemption from sin by the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. Knowledge also includes a personal relationship to those facts. Knowledge of Christ's redemption is more than simply knowing that Jesus died for sins; it is an agreement that *I* needed someone to die for *my* sins. It is trust that Jesus effectively accomplished *my* salvation by his death for all *my* sins. This kind of knowledge — more than sheer intellectual, cognitive knowledge — comes to us through the means of grace.

The word *benefit* speaks of the desired effect of Christ's redemption from sin. Jesus died to reconcile the world to God and the desired effect is that humanity would then *be* reconciled to God, that people would benefit from the redemption that Christ accomplished. This benefit comes to us through the means of grace.

Brought to the human race by the means of grace

Christianity is not a "come and get it" religion. It is a missionary enterprise. Redemption is a gift that is delivered; Christianity is a "go and give it" religion.

Again, appealing to the illustration of the sower and the seed and the field, the seed needs to be scattered in the field. The sower does not expect the field to come to the seed. The seed is brought to the field. The knowledge and benefit

of Christ's redemption need to be brought to the human race through the means of grace.

Romans 10:5-18 is a magnificent presentation of this reality. "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?" (Romans 10:13-15).

Jesus accomplished all that was necessary for mankind to be saved. But that salvation has to be brought to the human race.

We are told in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. In the very next sentence (5:19-20), it says that God has given 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."

People come to know about Christ's redemption as his ambassadors carry this message of reconciliation: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain" (2 Corinthians 5:21-6:1). The word *receive* indicates that through this message of reconciliation, the benefit of Christ's redemption comes to us. But we immediately understand that even though the benefits are given in the delivery of the message, it is possible to fail to receive them. "Do not receive God's grace in vain."

This issue is addressed in other places.

For example, John 1:11-13, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Romans 10:8-17 is an extended discussion of this issue. Note a few points:

- 1) "But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming" (10:8).
- 2) Receiving is by faith, but faith is the result of knowing or hearing. "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?" (10:14, italics added).
- 3) "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (10:17).

In the language of the parable of the sower, the seed, and the soils (Matthew 13:18-23), the seed can fall on different types of soil with differing results: 1) The seed is not received at all by the hard ground, 2) it is received only superficially by rocky ground, 3) it is received but choked out by weedy ground, and 4) it is received fruitfully by good ground.

The initial sentence in this paragraph of the Statement of Faith implies at least two things:

- 1) Christ's accomplishment of universal atonement does not guarantee the benefits to all people automatically.

- 2) Christ's atonement needs to be delivered to and received by the potential benefactors.

This is consistent with the statements made by God through the Apostle Paul in the passage referred to earlier, 2 Corinthians 5:19-20. "God 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*" (italics added). God initiated the redemptive work, accomplished it in Christ, and God now makes his appeal (through people) in applying the benefit of that work. After his resurrection, Jesus spoke to his disciples and explained that the message of the Bible was that the Christ would suffer and die, be raised from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness would be preached in his name (Luke 24:44-49). Jesus accomplished the suffering and the rising, what remains to be accomplished is the effective proclamation.

Compare this to John 3:16-18, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but *to save the world* through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already *because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son*" (italics added).

By the Holy Spirit through the means of grace

The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, cited above, that the appeal to reconciliation, and thus the benefit from Christ's redemption, comes through people. The Statement of Faith asserts that it is God the Holy Spirit who brings this knowledge and benefit to humanity. It also asserts that the Spirit is the one who calls us to respond. We cannot respond at our whim. Repentance and faith are gifts to those who are dead. Being dead in trespasses and sins means that we are separated from God completely and have no capacity to initiate a relationship with him. When people sin, they forfeit their freedom: "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). So God the Holy Spirit must set us free from bondage if we are to relate to God. This he does through the Word of the Gospel.

A picture of this is found in Ezekiel 37 where the Spirit of the Lord takes Ezekiel out into a valley of dry bones. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones and as he does, the bones come to life.

Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit would teach them all things and would take the things of Jesus and make those things known to them (John 14:26 and 16:14).

Paul also attributes this work to the Holy Spirit when he writes to the church in Corinth, "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:13-14).

The appeal to reconciliation, and thus to benefit from Christ's redemption,

comes through Christ's ambassadors — people, according to 2 Corinthians 5:19-20. Yet here the Statement of Faith asserts that it is God the Holy Spirit who brings knowledge and benefit to humanity. This potential discrepancy is resolved through an understanding of "means of grace." God "has committed to us the message of reconciliation...as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). It is God's plan to bring the knowledge and benefit of Christ's redemption to the world, so that the world may benefit from the work of Christ. It is God the Holy Spirit's work to do this through the "message of reconciliation" proclaimed by human ambassadors.

Means of Grace: The Word

The "message of reconciliation" is the Gospel. This message, whether it is written or spoken, verbal or visible, is the means by which God the Holy Spirit delivers redemption to people. We are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. As Christ's ambassadors communicate the Word of God that has been committed to the church, the Holy Spirit brings the benefit of Christ's redemption to the human race.

The message we communicate consists of two kinds of words: Law words and Gospel words.

The Word of the Law brings sinners to know their lost condition and repent

The word *law* has several uses in the Bible:

- 1) Law can refer to a principle, as in Romans 7:21: "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me."
- 2) Law can refer to the entire Old Testament, as in Psalm 119:52: "I remember your ancient laws, O Lord, and I find comfort in them." "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (Psalm 119:18). So law can be a general reference to the Word of God.
- 3) Law can refer to the first five books of Moses, the Pentateuch. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (Matthew 5:17).
- 4) Law can refer to the Mosaic Law: ceremonial, civil, and moral. "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law" (Galatians 4:4).

The ceremonial law is that part of the Mosaic Law which addressed the religious practices of the Israelite nation — the temple, the priesthood, and so on.

The civil law is that part of the Mosaic Law which addressed the political life of the nation, the laws about kings for example.

The moral law is that part of the Mosaic Law which revealed God's will concerning the moral behavior of the people. The Ten Commandments are the clearest expression of this component, summarized in the Great Commandment, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40).

Law can refer to any *statement that commands what we ought to do or what we should not do*. This is the theological use of the term, meaning that it is a categorical name used to describe a truth taught in the Bible, though the Bible may not always use the term this way.

There is an experienced sense of this, meaning that the way in which we hear something may sound to us as the voice of God's law or command. Someone may tell the story of Jesus' death for sinners, announcing it as Gospel, but some listeners might hear it as Law, condemning them for being such a terrible sinners that Jesus had to suffer and die for their sins.

There are three kinds of work that God does through the Law (sometimes called *the three uses* of the Law):

- 1) The first use of the Law is civil. It gives instruction to society and acts as a curb.
- 2) The second use of the Law is to convict us of sin and show us our need for a Savior.
- 3) The third use of the Law is to coach and guide believers in how God would have them live as Christians.

When the Law is preached, the Holy Spirit uses it to do his work in the hearer: conviction, coaching, either, or both.

The Law is not properly considered a means of grace. The work of the Law is to put people into a position where they realize their need for grace. The Law, as it convicts, makes them aware of the places where they are in the wrong, makes them conscious of the consequences of being in the wrong, and makes them ready to receive what the means of grace offer. So while the Law is not a means of grace, it is an essential servant of the means of grace.

The Law, as it helps us to know our lost condition, is important to our salvation. It puts us in the place where we are ready to receive the gift that God gives through the Gospel. This condition is called contrition. It means that we have seen the situation we are in and understand the gravity of that situation. In the Statement of Faith, the word *repentance* is used as a synonym for *contrition*. The word *repentance* is also used as a synonym for *faith* in many places; here it is a synonym for *contrition*. The Law cannot achieve repentance in the sense of faith in Christ. That is the work of the Gospel.

The Word of the Gospel brings sinners to believe in Jesus Christ, have the forgiveness of sin, become righteous in God's sight, and have eternal life

Just as with the word *Law*, so also *Gospel* can be used in several ways:

- 1) Gospel can be used to mean the revelation of who God is and what he has done in the story of Jesus from beginning to end. This is the way the Mark uses the term. "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).
- 2) Gospel is sometimes used in everyday language as a synonym for truth; "the gospel truth."
- 3) "Preaching the Gospel" is sometimes used to mean revival preaching, which calls people to repentance and faith.
- 4) In the narrower, stricter sense, Gospel literally means *good news*. It is

that part of the Word of God that tells us what God has accomplished and promised for us in Christ Jesus. In this theological use of the term, the Gospel is the primary means of grace.

When we say that the Holy Spirit *brings* sinners to know their lost condition, we are not suggesting the image of someone being dragged kicking and screaming into court for trial. The Holy Spirit *brings* sinners by awakening, illuminating, convicting, persuading, and convincing them of the active, purposeful, love of Christ. To say that the Holy Spirit *brings sinners* is to imply that only those who have seen their sin and need of a Savior are in a position to be brought to the cross. Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit does not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

When the Gospel is proclaimed, God the Holy Spirit is at work convincing people of the truth of the message and leading them to trust in the promise given in Christ. When the Gospel is proclaimed, Christ is present in the Word meeting the hearers and drawing them to faith. Christ the bridegroom is wooing the sinner into a love relationship, inviting, proposing marriage — to use a New Testament metaphor. When the Gospel is proclaimed, the one who has been condemned by the proclamation of the Law and knows his or her spiritual problem now sees the remedy in the cross of Christ. The provision that God has made in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them, having "made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21) — this is revealed to the stricken sinner and hope is conferred. Convinced of the validity of the work and Word, the sinner has what is offered: forgiveness of sin, righteousness in God's sight, and eternal life.

The Gospel is the means that God has given us to accomplish the ends he has commanded. It is the power of God to create new life and renew life. It is the power for justification and for sanctification. In our congregational life, God has promised to be present and working through his Word of Gospel. The power and presence of God are there. If we are not singing, speaking and proclaiming the Gospel, then we are not doing the things that give and nourish faith.

Means of Grace: The Sacraments

"What is a sacrament? It is a holy act, instituted by Christ, in which by visible means, He gives and confirms His invisible grace" (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 123).

A sacrament is a way in which Christ comes to us. It is a way in which Christ is present and working in our world today. It is not a human invention, but something instituted, commanded, and initiated by Jesus himself. The sacraments, unique from all other things that Jesus told his disciples and the Church to do, are visible, tangible, common acts that have a promise of grace associated with them.

We affirm that the main thing in a sacrament is the Word and promise of Christ. Without the Word, there is nothing there. The validity of the sacrament does not come from the officiant, the faith of the participant, or the right procedures. Its validity comes from the completed work of Christ on the cross

and the fact that God has instituted it. The sacraments are not different ways of salvation; they are different ways of delivering what Christ has done for the salvation of humankind. In the preached Word we hear of Christ with our ears, in the sacramental Word we hear of Christ with our touch and taste and smell and sight. We must be clear on this; the sacraments deliver the person and the work of Christ. They are ways of preaching the Gospel. They are visual promises from God to us in Christ.

The Sacrament of Baptism

Baptism comes from the Greek word that means to dip in order to wash or cleanse. In theological usage, it is “not merely water, but it is water used according to God’s command and connected with God’s Word” (Olsen and Rindon, 1992, p. 124). Other terminology used in the Bible to refer to baptism: Washing with water through the Word (Ephesians 5:26), washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5), being born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5).

God offers the benefit of Christ’s redemption to all people and graciously bestows the washing of regeneration and newness of life to all who believe. In baptism, Christ is present to offer the benefit of what he accomplished on the cross to all people. It is a Gospel invitation of a universal provision now offered to an individual.

This benefit of regeneration and new life (see Romans 6:3-14) is received where there is faith. As long as one continues in faith, the benefit bestowed is continuously enjoyed. Since Christ is present in the Word of baptism (remember, the sacraments are the visible Word), and the Holy Spirit is working through the Gospel (and the sacraments are Gospel), God is working faith in the person. Jesus comes in the Word and offers himself, all that he is and all that he has done. The Bible is unequivocal — faith is a gift (Ephesians 2:8; Acts 5:31; 2 Timothy 2:25) that is given through the Gospel (Romans 1:16 and 10:17). In and through the Gospel, God gives the gift of repentance and faith to whoever will receive it. This does not mean that God believes for us; we are the ones who believe or disbelieve. But believing and the capacity to believe are Gospel-given.

There may be some who come with hard hearts against God and yet ask to be baptized. In Matthew 3:7-10, some of the religious leaders were coming to where John was baptizing and John denounced them. The implication is that they were coming to be baptized, but that can’t be established for certain in the text. The point is that there are those who are not willing to receive the benefits God offers them in baptism, but they want to be baptized anyway. More often, those who are baptized are very ready to welcome and receive the grace gifts that God wants to give them in Christ. We ordinarily use a stronger word than *offer*; *give* seems preferable. But even when someone rejects the gift, the offer is still valid.

Baptism is not *another* way of salvation. Baptism is *the* way in which God offers to the sinner the benefit of what Christ has done. As the Word of the Gospel, baptism is a faith creator. Baptism is the message that Christ Jesus has died to wash away your sins.

Whether a person believes the Word and is baptized or is baptized and comes to believe the Word is not a critical sequence in New Testament teaching. The Old Testament parallel is clear. New converts believed and were circumcised; children were circumcised and led to discriminating faith. The normal New Testament practice was to receive the promise of the Word in both spoken and sacramental ways.

How do people come to faith and remain in faith? Through the hearing of the Gospel. How shall we do evangelism? By preaching the Gospel. How shall we pray for people to come to faith? By asking God to send a Gospel-preacher to them.

In baptism, God bestows the washing of regeneration. Jesus says that no one can see the kingdom of God without the new birth. In response to Nicodemus’ question, Jesus explains that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5).

Those who see baptism as a work of man in obedience to Christ cannot allow baptism to be part of the way of salvation, since we are saved by grace. But it is because they see baptism as Law instead of Gospel that they differ on this point. Interestingly, people sometimes reference Titus 3:5 to prove that God does not save us by deeds of righteousness (like baptism) which we have done, but by his mercy. This overlooks the fact that this phrase is immediately followed by the means of this saving mercy “through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

And newness of life to all who believe. Regeneration results in newness of life. This newness of life has objective and subjective aspects. Objectively, life is new because there is heavenly citizenship. Life is new because there is a new legal standing — free from the past, free from the guilt and penalty of sin. Life is new because there is a new family — heirs of God, joint heirs with Jesus. These are realities that are not always experienced immediately, totally. But life is also new in the subjective sense of having new preferences, new desires, a new will. We now love different things. We make different choices. Romans 6:2-4 says, “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” See also verses 11-14. Martin Luther supposedly said that faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone. John makes this point in his first letter with statements such as this: “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8).

God calls the baptized person to live in daily repentance. What is the significance of water baptism? “It signifies that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Concordia Publishing House, *A Short Explanation...*, 1971, p. 178).

This is the experience of living in daily repentance: sorrow for sin, turning from sin, and personal faith in the forgiveness of sin obtained by Christ.

Sorrow for sin is the realization that the walk of the Old Adam is deadly

to self and to others, and that it takes one away from fellowship with God. Repentance is having the same kind of attitude toward sin that God does — we see how God treats sin when we see the cross of Christ. Repentance is coming back to Christ regularly, repeatedly, to receive forgiveness and cleansing. We know that this forgiveness is available, because it has been obtained by Christ on the cross and promised in the Word, including the water Word of baptism.

Repentance is in many ways another word for faith. This does not reduce repentance to an intellectual adventure, but sees faith as a re-orientation of life. So repentance and faith are sometimes seen as two different things, when they may actually be words that complement each other and give a more holistic view of how we relate to God.

The caution is this: sorrow for sin should not become like the penance of the pre-Reformation era which said, in effect, “To somehow prove my repentance, I must perform some act of sorrow, whether it be tears or prayers or walking the *Via Dolorosa* on hands and knees.”

By grace we are daily given the power to overcome sinful desires and live a new life in Christ. Writing to the Christian Church, John says, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin.” Fellowship with God is walking in the light, and fellowship with God means purification, not perfection. Read all of 1 John 1:5-2:2 for the context of Christian living. Walking with God does give power over sinful desires, but those desires are not completely conquered until we are glorified. That is why we talk about daily repentance and cleansing. We are not defeated by sin, rather Christ has defeated sin, and we wage war against the desires that “war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). We know that if we continually cave in to sin without coming to Christ in repentance for cleansing, that we will begin to excuse sin. But if, on the other hand, we expect to be sinless, we will either re-define sin and become self-righteous, not needing a Savior, or we will become discouraged and abandon hope.

Some may infer from this statement that since we have the power to overcome sinful desires, it is possible to overcome sinful desires always. This oversimplifies the nature of sin (Romans 7). At times we may sin when we are conscious of not wanting to sin. We are given the power to overcome temptation and sin as we daily walk by faith. The experience of deliverance will never be perfect (anymore than any human activity is always perfect). Some of our failure is because of the power of our old nature, some of our failure springs from unbelief. God has said, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Possibly a better way to talk about the new creation in Christ would be to talk about the new potential for good works that the Holy Spirit creates in the believer. Instead of trying to focus on the absence of sin, we would talk about the presence of good works.

The Augsburg Confession, The Large Catechism and the Formula of Concord are confessional writings of the Lutheran Church. As we take the time to read a few selections from those writings, we will find that the question about faith and good works is not new to the Christian Church. In fact, those who

struggled with these questions in the past have some insight into the Word of God that will be helpful for us.

ARTICLE XX. Faith and Good Works

Consequently this teaching concerning faith is not to be accused of forbidding good works but is rather to be praised for teaching that good works are to be done and for offering help as to how they may be done. For without faith and without Christ human nature and human strength are much too weak to do good works, call upon God, have patience in suffering, love one’s neighbor, diligently engage in callings which are commanded, render obedience, avoid evil lusts, etc. Such great and genuine works cannot be done without the help of Christ, as he himself says in John 15:5, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Tappert, 1959, p. 46).

ARTICLE VI. The New Obedience

It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded, but we should do them for God’s sake and “not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God” (Tappert, 1959, p. 31-32).

ARTICLE XII. Repentance

Properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ), and this faith will comfort the heart and again set it at rest. Amendment of life and the forsaking of sin should then follow, for these must be the fruits of repentance, as John says, “Bear fruit that befits repentance” (Matthew 3:8) (Tappert, 1959, p. 34-35).

Those who do not continue to live in God’s grace need to be brought again to repentance and faith through the Law and Gospel. Saving faith is a present tense issue in the Bible. The question is not “Did you at one time believe?” or “Will you at some time in the future believe?” but “Do you believe now?” Today is the day of salvation. “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 4:7, quoting Psalm 95).

Saving faith entails continuing to live in a faith relationship with God, continuing to depend on the merits and work of Christ as promised by God. The Galatian heresy that Paul addressed was the idea that one was saved by grace and stayed saved by works. Paul writes, “I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (Galatians 3:2-3).

The normal Christian life is characterized by repentance and faith. All persons, believer and unbeliever alike, need to hear the Law and the Gospel. The believer needs to hear the Law so that smugness and indifference do not crowd out Christ. The unbeliever needs to hear Gospel since it is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe.

The preaching in a CLB congregation addresses *all* the hearers, not just the believer, not just the unbeliever. Everyone who hears is called to contrition and faith. For some who hear, contrition and faith are new, first time experiences. For most, contrition and faith are daily experiences. Because the preacher's goal is contrition and faith for all hearers, Law/Gospel preaching is the most helpful way for him to address his congregation.

When calling for a response from people at the conclusion of the hearing of the Word, the preacher remembers that both believer and unbeliever may have been brought to conviction of sin and sinfulness and need to hear the word of pardon. Therefore, the response for some may be a first time reception of Christ as Savior, for others, it may be a new revelation of God, for others it may be a new awakening to a new area of personal sin. Some may see themselves as prodigals who need to return to the Father's house. Some may see their need to open up their life to Christ in a new way. Each respondent is hearing the Spirit of God convict of sin and point to Jesus through the Law and Gospel.

Because the sinfulness of human nature passes on from generation to generation we baptize infants. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, their innocence and holiness were lost by their own unbelief and rebellion. This condition is inherited; it is passed on from generation to generation. "The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (Romans 5:18). David writes, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." (Psalm 51:5). We speak of this condition as original sin or inherited sin. Paul writes to the church in Ephesus and says, "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3).

The promise of God's grace includes little children; we baptize infants, who become members of Christ's believing church through baptism. If faith is a gift and is communicated by Gospel, what is to prevent an infant from receiving Christ? Is there some kind of intellectual capacity that qualifies one for being saved? Calling a little child to stand in the midst of the group, Jesus spoke of the "little ones" who believed in him (Matthew 18:2-6). In that context, Jesus indicated that the best candidate for the kingdom was not a rational, reasoning, intelligent, experienced adult, but a child. David also says, "You made me trust in you even at my mother's breast" (Psalm 22:9).

John 3:3-6 states that "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

Wherever there is a birth of the flesh, there must be a birth of the Spirit. The flesh-born unchanged cannot even see the kingdom of God, still less possess it, much less enjoy it. There must be new life, spiritual life, divine life breathed into that fleshly, carnal nature... Here we must take our stand. No child can be saved unless it be first reached by renewing Grace. If ever an infant did die, or should die, in that state in which it was born, unchanged by divine Grace, that infant is lost. There are, there can be, no unregenerate souls in heaven. Where there is no infant regeneration, there can be no infant salvation (Gerberding, 1919, p. 35-36).

There is no Lutheran theologian who denies the possibility that the grace of God can reach the child some other way.

The question might here be asked: Is baptism so absolutely essential to salvation, that unbaptized children are lost? To this we would briefly reply, that the very men who drew up our Confessions deny emphatically that it is thus absolutely necessary. Luther, Melancthon, Bugenhagen and others, repudiate the idea that an unbaptized infant is lost. No single acknowledged theologian of the Lutheran Church ever taught this repulsive doctrine (Gerberding, 1919, p. 49).

Practice of baptism reflects what we believe in the larger picture about redemption. An infant is a human being who is born in sin and needs salvation. The infant is unable to offer anything to God, is unable to cooperate with God, is not able to contribute anything to redemption, but can only receive what God gives.

These children (as they are becoming adults) need to come to know (experience in their own hearts) that they are sinners with a sinful nature that opposes God. This reality needs to be communicated effectively to children. Since only sinners can be saved, the Law needs to continue to do its work in the lives of people if they are to continually see their need of Christ. The problem is that children are not adults. Treating them as adults (or treating adults as children) does not take people seriously.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, they need to confess their sinfulness and yield to God; and possess for themselves forgiveness of their sin through Jesus Christ, as they are led from the faith received in infant baptism into a clear conscious personal faith in Christ as their Lord and Savior and being assured of salvation, rely solely on the finished work of Christ, and the power of the Gospel to live as children of God.

The task of leading children to conscious faith is not something that can be isolated or assigned to a particular age or activity. Young children, who believe almost anything adults tell them, need to be nurtured in grace and cared for in ways that are appropriate to who they are. Older children and teenagers need to be confronted with the new realities of human nature that they are dealing with as well. And just because a teen has responded as a teen to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, the church needs to realize that the struggle with faith continues. The crisis events that may have happened when they first felt guilt as a five-year-old or when they first came face to face with personal sinfulness as a fifteen-year-old may recur when they begin to set down roots independent of family and friends in a work or academic environment. God continually calls them by Law and Gospel in ways appropriate to their age and experience. They will yield to his wooing in ways appropriate to who they are and where they are.

The Law in the theological/narrow sense needs to be preached to these children. Often the Law is preached as good advice. They need good advice, but they also need to be convicted of sin and sinfulness in a way that kills them and drives them to Christ. If they are going to *confess their sinfulness* that will only happen as the Holy Spirit convicts them through the Word of the Law. Jesus said the work of the Spirit was to "convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). Paul writes, "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” (Romans 3:19-20). Through the Law, the Holy Spirit brings people to *confess their sinfulness*.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, they need to yield to God. It is God’s will that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). God is the one who calls and pursues and loves and sacrifices so that humanity may be saved. In the words of the Explanation to the Catechism, the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 75). God pursues humans. It is not that we loved him, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. It was not Adam who came looking for God in the garden. God was and is the seeker. The God of the Bible is a missionary God who desires the salvation of people. Consider what God has done for our salvation in Christ. Realize that God the Holy Spirit is pursuing and calling and convicting and enlightening us through Word and sacrament and people. “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us,” (2 Corinthians 5:20). What is the response of the rebellious sinner to all this? It is appropriately stated in the words, yield to God. The tendency of humanity is for each to go one’s own way. “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love,” in the words of the songwriter. The opposite of going one’s own way is to yield to God. This yielding means that not only do I acknowledge that he “has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, bought and freed me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil,” but that he has a place for me — “that I might be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness” and joy forever (Olsen and Rinden 1992, p. 60).

And possess for themselves... There is a sense in which a young person is not his or her own. They are products of biology and environment. The life they lead now, the attributes and possessions they have — all these have come to them as gifts from someone else, especially from their parents. They did not think to reject these gifts. But as their world expands and their minds mature, they begin to make assessments of the things they have been given. “Just because my dad sells furniture, does that mean I will? Just because my parents are of a particular political party, does that mean I am also? Just because my parents are Christian, does that mean I am?”

When young people possess for themselves the forgiveness of their sin through Jesus Christ, they will then be trusting in the Word, not as a given from childhood that they never much doubted, but as a teaching and promise that they have learned and have come to rest upon. When they rest on the finished work of Christ — not even on their own experience of it — this brings assurance of salvation. This assurance will necessarily have to be established again and again in their relationship with God, for example, when they are defeated by sin or when they are tempted to find security in their own works. For the baptized child this is a spiritual development that parallels his or her personal development. It cannot be prescribed whether an individual’s spiritual development will be a day-to-day development, or a development through a variety of crises.

The power of the Gospel to live as children of God... What are the resources of the Gospel on which young and old alike can draw to live as children of God?

The New Testament continually moves from the indicative — “Therefore,

I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy...” — to the imperative — “...to offer your bodies as living sacrifices...to God” (Romans 12:1-2). As we are continually hearers of the Gospel, we are called to thanksgiving and praise out of grateful hearts.

The new creation, made in the image of Christ, experiences the work of the Holy Spirit as he bears fruit in the believer’s life. Obedience comes, not under compulsion of Law (though with the instruction of the Law) but under the compelling power of Christ’s love (2 Corinthians 5:14). Does the believer always see the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her own life? No, and spending much time looking for it can be counterproductive. Yet many will attest to the fact that over time they can see the results of the Holy Spirit bearing fruit within them and through them.

Confession and absolution (a verbal assurance of forgiveness), usually in a relationship with another believer, is another resource of the Gospel. It is sometimes called *accountability* in the present culture. As we acknowledge our sin and come to hate that sin, we can find strength in the words of forgiveness as a brother or sister in Christ verbally declares them to us.

Word and sacrament are the ways in which God meets us. Baptism assures us that we have been buried with Christ and have been raised with him to new life. Holy Communion is the assurance of Christ’s presence and forgiveness and the affirmation of the oneness of the body of Christ. It is being strengthened for holy living with spiritual food.

The congregation is given to us as a resource. There we find encouragement and assistance to live in God’s grace. It thus stands against the heresy of individualism in the Western World.

Prayer is where we go to ask for strength as well. Ask and you will receive. You have not because you ask not. Faith focuses on the promises of God, giving us access to what he promises, and declaring our dependence on him.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you.” Then he took the cup and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (1 Corinthians 11:23-25; Matthew 26:27-28).

This was not a regular evening meal. This was a ceremonial meal that commemorated the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. It was a meal that celebrated God’s salvation under the first covenant. As he instituted the Lord’s Supper, Jesus inaugurated the new covenant, which also is celebrated by a meal, highly structured, filled with meaning and effect, an event in which all the people of God are expected to participate.

In, with, and under the bread and wine are Jesus’ body and blood. How? In a mystical but real fashion, not open to investigation, Jesus is present. We know this by authority of God’s Word (Matthew 26:26-28; 1 Corinthians 10:16). There is no chemical change that takes place. There is only one substance present. But Jesus said as he instituted the Supper on the night he was betrayed,

“This is my body; this is my blood.”

As we participate we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. In that proclamation, in the eating and drinking, the full benefits of what Christ Jesus did when he gave his life and shed his blood, are given to us — the “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28).

Certainly sins are forgiven and forgiveness is received in ways other than the Lord’s Supper. But we celebrate it because of Jesus’ command and promise (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:25). In the first church in Jerusalem they observed it often (Acts 2:42).

In addition to receiving the forgiveness of sins, Communion unites the Church as we all receive the same grace, responding to our common need (1 John 1:1-4). We are united: 1) in Jesus Christ, the basis of common faith (1 Corinthians 10:16-17), 2) in his death on our behalf for the forgiveness of sin (Matthew 26:28 1 Corinthians 11:26), and 3) in anticipation of his return (Luke 22:18).

Communion sustains and grows “faith, hope and love” as the church participates in this shared grace together (Ephesians 4:11-16). In it we “call to mind” and “proclaim” the basis of our assurance of salvation (1 Corinthians 11:25-26).

Communion is an effective means of bringing people to the assurance of the forgiveness of sins. It can be of particular benefit in time of special need (Matthew 16:19).

People may be dealing with serious or controlling sins and guilt. It is the Gospel that empowers people to change their behavior. The Law cannot accomplish that.

In situations where people have asked for prayer for healing, a time of confession and receiving the Lord’s Supper is an appropriate preparation for healing prayer (James 5:14-16).

The Communion service is traditionally a faith community event rather than a private event. Communion is the successor to the Passover, which was celebrated in the biological family. Communion is celebrated by the faith family, which is baptismal, not biological. It is a water family, not a blood family. This sacrament is meant for believers (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). Being unworthy of Jesus’ body and blood is the primary reason to receive the forgiveness promised. But it is possible to receive Communion with an unworthy attitude. Therefore, self-examination is commanded (1 Corinthians 11:28, 31):

- 1) Do we believe the promises? “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6).
- 2) Do we recognize Jesus’ presence? “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. Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:27, 29).
- 3) Do we repent of our sins? 1 John 1:5-10 speaks of the need to be honest in the presence of God about our sins. We come to the Lord’s Supper

to receive forgiveness. That implies confession. Do we recognize that our sins are wrong and that they will be the death of us? Do we realize that Jesus is the only way that we can live? That implies faith and repentance.

- 4) Are we reconciled with our fellow believers? Matthew 5:23-24 and 6:12, 14-15 have traditionally been understood to mean that being reconciled to one another is essential if we are to be reconciled to God. Or, if we have been reconciled to God, reconciliation to each other is mandatory. If we do not value reconciliation with others, we put ourselves in a place where we are distancing ourselves from God’s will for us. We are living in rebellion.

Because Communion is intended for baptized believers and requires time for self-examination, it is often practiced outside of public worship events.

We welcome children in the Communion service, often including them in special ways. But we do not offer them Communion itself until they are old enough to be taught and old enough for self-examination (1 Corinthians 11:28). Through teaching they will appreciate its significance and through growth in years they will be able to examine themselves properly. Self-examination is a capacity that ordinarily comes to a child sometime in the early teens. It is a capacity that is part of the developmental processes of the physical, moral, and spiritual life of the child. It isn’t that the pre-teen is a different kind of person, but the pre-teen does not have adult capacities. Traditionally Lutherans have used Confirmation as the time of teaching about the Lord’s Supper. Both Confirmation and the invitation to participate in Communion typically coincide with normal development into early adulthood for the child.

Study Questions

- 1) How does the way a church practices baptism reflect on the larger question of how a church understands God's way of salvation?
- 2) Discuss the inherent distinction between baptism as the sacrament of initiation and Communion as the sacrament of nurture.
- 3) What are some ways that the sacraments can be lost from the church and be given over to biological families? How does this diminish the baptismal community and its mission to biological families?
- 4) The reading and the preaching of the Word of God, especially the Gospel, are central ways in which God works in and through his people. How should a proper understanding of the Word as a means of grace influence the planning of the Sunday gatherings or services of the church?
- 5) If the Gospel is not central to the Sunday services of the church, what is the value of the gathering? How important is it to insure that Sunday services are Gospel-centered events?
- 6) If you can't understand it, does that mean it isn't true? What are some evidences of over-intellectualizing faith? What are some dangers?

CHAPTER 8: ETERNAL SALVATION

Eternal salvation is available to every living human being on earth by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This salvation consists of an instantaneous aspect and an ongoing, continual aspect.

Justification is God's gracious act by which He, for Christ's sake, instantaneously acquits repentant and believing sinners and credits them with Christ's righteousness. At that moment, God gives each one who believes a new and godly nature and the Holy Spirit begins the process of sanctification. There is no place for human effort in justification.

Sanctification is God's gracious, continual work of spiritual renewal and growth in the life of every justified person. Through the means of grace, the Holy Spirit works to reproduce the character of Christ within the lives of all believers, instructing and urging them to live out their new nature. The Holy Spirit enables believers more and more to resist the devil, to overcome the world, and to count themselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit produces spiritual fruit in and bestows spiritual gifts upon all believers. He calls, empowers and equips them to serve God in the home, in the community, and as part of the Church Universal. The process of sanctification will be complete only when the believer reaches glory.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph H

Glossary

Justification: “Justification is the gracious act of God by which He, for Christ's sake, acquits me (declares me not guilty), a repentant and believing sinner of my sin and guilt, credits me with Christ's righteousness, and looks upon me, in Christ, as though I had never sinned” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 79).

Sanctification: “Sanctification is the gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which He daily renews me more and more in the image of God through the Word and Sacraments” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p.84).

Regeneration: Regeneration “is the gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which He, because He has come to live in my heart, renews the image of God in me, and creates a new spiritual being” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992 p. 81).

Eternal salvation

This exact phrase is found only once (Hebrews 5:9) but expresses an idea that is everywhere in the Bible. Phrases that speak of a similar reality would include “eternal life” (John 3:16), “enter the kingdom of heaven” (compare Matthew 19:16, 23), or being saved (Matthew 19:25). Eternal salvation is contrasted with eternal fire (Matthew 18:8), with death (Romans 6:23), and with eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46).

The entire Bible is organized around the arrival of eternal salvation in the person of Jesus Christ. The purpose of the Bible is that people would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they might have life in his name (John 20:31). The Bible is the story of the way God planned, provided, and continues to provide this salvation.

The underlying idea of eternal salvation is that of rescue. The normal condition of humanity is “dead in transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) and “objects of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). If humanity — or any individual human — is to live, it must be rescued from death and wrath. The Bible gives us several perspectives to enhance our understanding of the way of eternal salvation:

- 1) *Redemption* addresses our bondage to sin, death, and the devil until Christ sets us free. “The word redeem means to buy back or to set someone free by paying a ransom” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 66).
- 2) *Reconciliation* addresses our alienation from God. The work of Christ, which restores the broken relationship, turns us from enemies to friends of God.
- 3) *Justification* is courtroom terminology that speaks of a changed verdict — from guilty to not guilty, from condemnation to no condemnation. “Justification is the gracious act of God by which He, for Christ’s sake, acquits me (declares me not guilty), a repentant and believing sinner of my sin and guilt, credits me with Christ’s righteousness, and looks upon me, in Christ, as though I had never sinned” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992 p. 79).
- 4) *Regeneration* addresses the total brokenness of our old nature and our spiritual bankruptcy by giving birth to a new person or nature that desires what the Spirit desires. “The new birth, sometimes called regeneration, is the gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which He, because He has come to live in my heart, renews the image of God in me, and creates a new spiritual being” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 81).
- 5) *Resurrection*, though not as explicit, addresses the fact that we are dead in our transgressions, but God makes us alive in Christ and seats us with Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6-7).
- 6) *Forgiveness* addresses the removal of that which got in the way of our relationship with God as Jesus takes away our sin and bears our guilt for us. “When God forgives me my sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, He blots them all out, and I do not have them any more” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 81).

- 7) *Propitiation* assures us that the wrath of God was poured out on Christ so that it is no longer directed at the one who is now in Christ.

Available to every living human being on earth

Two questions are often asked regarding the availability of salvation to every living human being on earth: “Did Jesus’ atoning works have universal *validity*?” and “Did Jesus’ atoning works have universal *effect*?” Asked another way, “Did Jesus die for everyone, and if so, is everyone going to heaven?” During the 2000 years of Christian history and tradition, the answer to the first question has usually been *yes* and the answer to the second usually *no*.

The *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism* asks, “Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true man?” and “Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true God?” The answers are given: “It was necessary for our Savior to be true man in order that He might fulfill the law for us, and suffer and die in our place.” And “It was necessary for our Savior to be true God so that His blood might have unlimited power to pay for the sins of all people” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, pp. 62-63). Being the God-man, Jesus had the capacity or ability to atone for all of humanity.

John introduces Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). *World* in this statement means all of humanity (as compared to the entire universe). Paul writes that God was in Christ reconciling the world (all of humanity) to himself, not counting men’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19). John writes to the church and says, “If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice [propitiation] for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2).

Theologians call this *objective salvation* or *objective justification*. The word *objective* emphasizes something that has happened outside of us. It is what it is regardless of our feelings about it or our experience of it. This contrasts with the idea of *subjective salvation* — the individual’s experience of salvation, which will vary from person to person. So we can say that Jesus’ work of salvation has been accomplished objectively for the whole world, but salvation is accomplished subjectively as people hear the Gospel and believe it (John 3:18). This means that there are people who will experience eternal condemnation even though their sins are forgiven.

In this sense, eternal salvation is available for every living human being on earth. However, it is not true that everyone is therefore saved. The salvation that Jesus objectively obtained for everyone is not available to everyone in a way that they can subjectively, personally, benefit from and enjoy. It must first be delivered. The missionary enterprise is concerned with the delivery of that salvation to all people everywhere through the proclamation of the Gospel. In Luke 24:46-47, after his resurrection, Jesus says that the message of the Bible is that the Christ must suffer and die and be raised and that the message must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Having accomplished death and resurrection, Jesus gave to the church his Holy Spirit to accomplish the work of proclamation.

The Bible is clear; no one seeks God. God is the seeker and in order for

salvation to be available to everyone, God must pursue them and give them this salvation. How that happens was the subject of chapter seven.

By grace alone

Ephesians 2:8 says that it is by grace that you have been saved. Grace is often thought of as a power, and if grace saves, then it obviously is capable of doing something quite powerful. But a better perspective of grace would be that it is God's benevolent attitude toward humans that moves him to give to us what Christ has done for us without any merit or deserving on our part. The power for salvation is in what Christ has done. God credits the believer with Christ's work. He does this because of his undeserved favor directed toward us in view of what Christ has done for us. By grace we are saved and by grace we stand. If God's grace, his unmerited favor, were taken from us, we would not be saved and we would not stand.

One of the points of clarification at the time of the Protestant Reformation was whether grace was in us or outside of us. Some had taught salvation by grace, but taught that grace was a power that God put in us to assist us in doing the things that God commands so that we can be saved. In that view, saying that one is saved by grace is not inconsistent with saying that one is saved by works. In that case, one would look inside one's self to find assurance of salvation. However, we believe that grace is outside of us. God saves by grace when he looks with favor on the sinner for Jesus' sake. If grace is outside of us, we look outside of ourselves to find our assurance. We look to Christ.

What moved God to act in the first place? Grace. To plan and to act for our salvation was a gracious act of God.

Through faith alone

"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:21-22).

Righteousness is what I need and righteousness is what I lack. The Law makes this clear. But there is a righteousness that is available, that God makes known, and this righteousness comes from God through faith in Christ to all who believe. By his grace, God gives righteousness to all who believe, because of Christ. This seems to be the only condition. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Verse 18 records, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." Faith in Christ is the way that we receive what God graciously gives. Some synonyms for faith include trust and reliance. Verb forms are believe, trust, and rely.

There are some things to note in regard to this believing, saving faith:

- 1) The present tense is important to notice. The emphasis is not on the past as in someone who did believe, or in the future as in someone who will believe, but in the present as one who believes.
- 2) Saving faith for adults includes knowledge of the existence of salvation

through Christ. It implies recognition of the value of this salvation. It is most essentially trust and reliance of the heart. For infants, this trust is what they have. As David says, "You made me trust in you even at my mother's breast" (Psalm 22:9).

- 3) Saving faith is connected to receiving Christ, as is apparent in John 1:12-13. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." Notice that "receive" is parallel to "believe in his name." This gives insight into what Jesus is talking about when he says that we must become as children to enter the kingdom. Infants are receivers. They just receive what is given to them; they swallow it. When we get older, we get selective. We start to question and doubt and challenge what is given to us. We become skeptics. We want to be the judge of what we receive and we want to evaluate and test what is given.
- 4) Faith is a gift from God according to Ephesians 2:8-9. "For 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." If God does not give us faith, we cannot believe.

In Christ alone

The value of faith is in the object of faith.

Some people think that anything is possible if they only believe strongly enough. It doesn't matter what they believe *in*, just that they believe. This approach might be called faith in faith. But in reality, faith is only as good as the object of faith. It doesn't matter how much you believe you can walk on water in the winter, what matters is the thickness of the ice. If we believe in what is dependable, our faith is well placed. If we believe in what is not reliable, we might just be gullible. It is helpful to keep faith and gullibility in separate categories.

The object of saving faith is Christ. Saving faith trusts Christ and Christ alone for salvation. How do I know that I am acceptable in the presence of God and that I am included with God's people? Because of God's promise connected with what Christ has done for me. That is my sole hope and trust.

An axiom from the time of the Protestant Reformation says, "Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone." Saving faith, the new creation, and regeneration all have consequences in a person's experience, one's life is changed. An important thing is to affirm that it is faith alone in Christ alone that receives eternal salvation; it is not the fruit of faith (good works) that receives salvation.

Justification

Gracious, instantaneous act of God

Justification, the opposite of condemnation, is not something that is

progressive. Justification and condemnation are like an on/off switch. You are at all times — everyone is at all times — either justified or condemned.

As a gracious act of God, justification is something that God does for Jesus' sake. It is something that God does because of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross.

It is an act of God — not of angels, not of the church, not of the world, not of our own experience or opinion. God is the one who justifies. The eternal judge of heaven and earth makes the pronouncement of justification. That pronouncement is going to hold up because it comes from the highest court — the court of heaven. If God justifies, who is going to condemn? (See Romans 8:31-34.)

Acquitted and credited for Christ's sake

There is great benefit from a careful reading of Romans 3:9-5:2. After Paul has thoroughly proclaimed the condemnation of the whole human race, he writes (Romans 3:19-20), “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 [justified] in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

Verse 21 begins with the word *but*, which serves to introduce a radical change of thought. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (3:21a-22).

Righteous is the necessary state for anyone who desires a relationship with God. Paul has demonstrated that it is impossible to be righteous by observing the Law. God will not declare anyone righteous for his or her attempt to perfectly observe the Law. Instead, there is a righteousness that is from God, and it comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

In verses 25-26, we see that “God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice... at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

Is this something new that God has introduced in the New Testament? How were Old Testament figures Abraham and David declared righteous? “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3). This is a statement of positive credit given to Abraham through faith.

King David's case is similar but there is a negative crediting (see Romans 4:6-8). Whereas Abraham was credited with righteousness by faith, David writes, “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.” David was blessed by *not* having his sin charged against him. This demonstrates two sides of justification. Righteousness credited to our account; sins not charged against our account.

To review a few phrases in the letter to the Romans, Paul says that God is the one who “justifies the wicked” (4:5), “gives life to the dead” (4:17), and “calls things that are not as though they were” (4:17).

In ordinary usage, *to justify* means to defend an action as being a good action when someone calls it into question. We try to justify our actions and justify ourselves. But as Paul uses the word in Romans 4, he is talking about something different. God's declaration of acquittal and righteousness is not based on our excuses for our behavior or our explanations for what we have done. God's declaration of acquittal is based on what Jesus has done for us. God does not first make us righteous and then declare us to be righteous — God simply declares us to be righteous. Justification is something that is done “outside” of us rather than “inside” of us. It is God calling “things that are not as though they were” (4:17). The righteousness with which the believer is credited in justification is sometimes called an “alien” righteousness because it isn't native to the sinner-believer.

As Jesus was engaged in his earthly ministry, God said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” The Father said this both at Jesus' baptism and at the transfiguration (Matthew 3:17 and 17:5). To be credited with the righteousness of Christ implies that the Father pronounces that same verdict on the believer who has found a place in Christ. One cannot improve on that position nor can one improve on those works. To be credited with the righteousness of Christ and to be in Christ implies that one cannot be more pleasing to God than one already is in Christ. One can certainly do things that please God, but one cannot be more pleasing to God.

A definition of justification by faith is found in the *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*: “Justification is the gracious act of God by which He, for Christ's sake, acquits me (declares me not guilty), a repentant and believing sinner of my sin and guilt, credits me with Christ's righteousness, and looks upon me, in Christ, as though I had never sinned” (Olsen and Rinden: 79). As we read in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

The evidence that God can do what he says he will do is seen in the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, each of whom was as good as dead — and God gave life to their deadness (Romans 4:18-21). The second evidence is the resurrection of Jesus our Lord. Jesus was delivered over to death because of the sins we had committed and was raised to life because our justification had been accomplished (4:22-25).

As God incarnate, Jesus fully paid the penalty for our sin. Christ's resurrection is the assurance that the sins of the world have been taken away. The one who is justified by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus is also assured of his or her own resurrection from the dead. Since sins are gone, death is also defeated. So Paul is emphatic about the historical reality of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

Consider two quotes on justification:

Concerning the righteousness of faith before God we believe... that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation...) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned

to us as righteousness (Tappert, 1959, pp. 540-541).

To be saved, we must be righteous. We must fulfil the Law perfectly. But we are not capable of doing that. Christ only has perfectly kept the Law; not, however, for Himself — He had no need of that — but for us and in our place. As He most graciously says: “I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (John 17:19). Christ sanctified Himself “for our sakes” by suffering and obedience. He kept the Law perfectly. He loved God above all things. He had a holy heart, holy thoughts, holy life and holy speech. He loved also His neighbor as Himself. His love was so great that He died for His enemies. He suffered what we should have endured. When He was reviled, He reviled not again. When He suffered, He cursed not. His fulfilling of the Law thus through faith becomes my fulfilling of the Law. His righteousness is transferred to me and becomes my righteousness (Rosenius, 1923, pp. 102-103).

It is clear from our study in Romans that works must be excluded from justification. There are several benefits deriving from this fact. Works must be excluded from our justification:

- 1) So that we can be certain and sure of our salvation.
- 2) So that God will receive all the glory for our salvation.
- 3) So that no one believer could claim to be more justified than another.
- 4) So that our salvation is complete and instantaneous as soon as we repent and believe in Christ.

This article of justification by faith is “the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine,” “without which no poor conscience can have any abiding comfort or rightly understand the riches of the grace of Christ.” In the same vein Dr. Luther declared: “Where this single article remains pure, Christendom will remain pure, in beautiful harmony, and without any schisms. But when it does not remain pure, it is impossible to repel any error or heretical spirit” (Tappert, 1959, p. 540).

Justification by faith must be taught:

- 1) Against those who teach that grace or love in our heart is the cause of justification.
- 2) Against those who base justification on the Christ in us or upon his indwelling and sanctifying influence in our heart.
- 3) Against those who reject the legal process of justification and stress instead the ethical process.
- 4) Against those who get the order of salvation mixed up.

The biblical order of salvation is: justified, then sanctified; forgiven, then changed; declared righteous, then made more Christ-like.

There are two emphases that may lead to confusion:

- 1) An emphasis on accepting Christ in one’s heart instead of emphasizing

justification may lead people to wonder if they really have Christ in their heart, or if they need to accept him again, or if they need to accept him the correct way this time.

- 2) An emphasis on personal experiences instead of emphasizing justification may lead people to look within themselves rather than outside themselves to Christ for the basis of their assurance.

The subjective aspect of justification is important. The problems arise when the subjective side overshadows the objective side. Someone might say, “I believe I am saved because I believe.” In this case, the expressed reason for salvation is their faith. This can become relativistic to the point where it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe. Instead, we might substitute “I believe I am saved because Jesus lived and died for the world and that means he lived and died for me.” In this case, the subjective side (I believe... for me) is appropriately related to the objective side (Jesus lived and died for the world).

Sanctification

There is an aspect of sanctification that is already completed. “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness (*dikaiosune*), holiness (*hagiosmos*) and redemption (*apolutrosis*)” (1 Corinthians 1:30). “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed (*apolouo*), you were sanctified (*hagiozo*), you were justified (*dikaioo*) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). This means that our holiness (in the original Greek, same word family as sanctification) is complete because our holiness is from Christ. Sanctification is also spoken of as a past action — “You were sanctified.” When used in this way, holiness or sanctification is a status that is completed.

In this paragraph of the Statement of Faith, however, sanctification is explained as a progressive, ongoing process. While that is the more common understanding of the word group, it is valuable to remember that the word is also used in the completed sense.

Gracious, ongoing work of God

While justification is instantaneous, like an on/off switch, Christians usually speak of sanctification as a progressive and ongoing process, more like a rheostat.

Sanctification is a continual work of God that is not completed in this life. It is also a gracious work of God. God does not sanctify us because we deserve it, because we’ve earned it, or because there is something in us that merits this work in any way. It is something that God does in us because of Jesus.

Spiritual renewal and growth

Renewal is being made new in the spirit. It is the continual re-creation of the person that makes each day new in the presence of God. Each day, going our own way, we move toward self and sin and death. Each day, for Jesus’ sake, God turns us back to Jesus and gives us a new beginning again.

This growth is described in Ephesians 4:12-16 as having several dimensions. As Christians, we are part of a church body under the leadership of God-given leaders. God uses that church leadership to bring growth to each part of the body. This growth is doctrinal as we learn the truth and grow so that we are no longer blown around by every wind of doctrine and the deceitful scheming of crafty, cunning people. This growth is relational as we learn to speak the truth in love and grow together as we speak to each other this way. This growth is missional as each of us learns to do our part. This growth is communal as we grow together, each of us doing our part in harmony with the others.

In every justified person

To repeat an earlier statement, we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone. We are saved by faith apart from works, but that faith is a faith that works.

When we are tempted to doubt our salvation because we do not see the fruit of faith, we should not try to manufacture fruit. We should rather return to the cross to hear of the one who died for us to give us forgiveness of sins and new life. We need to remember that in Christ we have been declared righteous apart from any works on our part. It is in the Gospel that faith is renewed and it is out of that faith that fruit is produced. Peter writes that if you are not exhibiting the fruits of faith, the problem is that you have forgotten that you have been forgiven (2 Peter 1:5-9).

The Holy Spirit Works Through the Means of Grace

Reflect on what has been previously said about the means of grace in chapter 7. While that chapter emphasized the means of grace as the way in which people came to faith, it is also important to realize that the means of grace are the means by which God keeps us in faith and grows us in faith.

While the Law is an instrument that the Holy Spirit uses, it is not an instrument of grace, but rather one of conviction, condemnation, and correction. The Law is like a plumb line that doesn't fix anything, but just shows where things are wrong.

The power to build and grow is Gospel power. The Holy Spirit works through Gospel, both Word and Sacrament, to sanctify the believer. As Paul begins his section on Christian living in Romans 12:1, he makes his appeal through, or by means of, the mercies of God that have been expressed in the previous chapters.

The power for the work of sanctification is not exhortation by *oughts* and *shoulds* but proclamation of God's *done*. This does not mean that there is no use for the Law in sanctification. There is. But the power for sanctification is the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel — the means of grace.

We recognize in this that both believer and unbeliever need to hear both Law and Gospel. The same word that calls people to faith initially also calls people to faith continually. The Gospel that saves is also the Gospel that sanctifies.

Reproducing the character of Christ

What is the Holy Spirit trying to form in us as he sanctifies? The character of Christ. A disciple is someone who is following, learning, and being shaped by the one he or she follows. As the Holy Spirit calls us to follow Christ, the Spirit works first to deliver the life and work of Jesus to us and then to form the person of Christ in us.

Overcoming spiritual enemies

The tempters of the soul are the world, the flesh and the devil. When Adam and Eve refused to serve under God and through disbelief rebelled against God, they became separated from God and found themselves under the dominion of sin, death, and Satan. These masters rule in a way that makes life a wasteland. The death and resurrection of Jesus atoned for the rebellion and defeated the enemies so that those who are in Christ can be free of the dominion of those enemies and live under the gracious kingdom of God.

Making us dead to sin but alive to God

The Holy Spirit indwells the believer, reminding of the victory, warning of the danger of the adversary, and pointing to Christ. By these means, the Holy Spirit continually calls the believer to daily repentance and renewal, and to resist the temptation of the devil, the world and the flesh. Each day the Holy Spirit condemns the sinful nature through the Law and gives life in Christ through the Gospel. Each day, the Holy Spirit works to turn us away from our own way and direct us toward Christ.

Producing spiritual fruit and enabling for service

Walking in step with the Holy Spirit has the effect of fruitful living. This fruit is seen in two ways:

- 1) The Holy Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit in the believer — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, and the like (see Galatians 5:22-23).
- 2) The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to each believer by which the believer is joined in mission to the church and empowered for fruitful ministry in the church.

Sanctification Completed in Glory

The process of discipleship is an ongoing process while we are living here in this present age. We live in the present as people who are completely righteous in God's eyes, but very flawed in our own eyes and in the eyes of the people around us. It is important to reflect on the different opinions about us and think about whose opinion is most important: our opinion of us, others' opinions of us, or God's opinion of us.

In this lifetime the believer will never be, in experience (subjectively), what he or she is positionally (objectively). In this world we have weaknesses

that will not be completely remedied until we receive our new, glorified bodies at the resurrection.

Study Questions

- 1) What difference does it make if there is a salvation that is accomplished for all people as compared to a salvation accomplished for some people?
- 2) How do people get confused if they do not understand that there is an objective salvation that has been accomplished except for the proclamation?
- 3) How do people subjectively gain what has been objectively given to them?
- 4) In Mark 2:5, Jesus said, “Your sins are forgiven.” The people around believed that in that statement Jesus was forgiving the man’s sins. Is there another possibility of meaning?
- 5) In some churches, the clergy tell people that their sins are forgiven, thereby implying that they have the power to forgive sins. In others, forgiveness is proclaimed as Gospel. What is the difference?
- 6) What happens if justification and sanctification become confused or out of sequence?
- 7) Where would one look for assurance of eternal salvation — to justification or to sanctification? Why? Have there been times when people have done that inappropriately or incorrectly?

The Church Universal consists of all those who truly believe on Jesus Christ as Savior. The local congregation is an assembly of believers in a certain locality among whom the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are rightly administered. The confessing membership of the local congregation shall include only those who have been baptized into “the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” confess personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, maintain a good reputation in the community and accept the constitution of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. It cannot, however, be avoided that hypocrites might be mixed in the congregation; that is, those whose unbelief is not evident to the congregation.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph I

The Biblical Congregation

Of the issues that led to the formation of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren in 1900, church membership was probably foremost. It was common at that time for children to be baptized into the church as infants, confirmed in the faith as teenagers, and welcomed to the Lord’s table and ushered into membership of the church without much regard for personal confession of faith (Levang, 1991, p. 103-104). Rev. K.O. Lundeberg was one of the founders of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. CLB historian J.H. Levang reports that earlier in his ministry, Lundeberg was concerned that corporate confession, public absolution, and open invitation to the Lord’s Supper were contrary to the Word of God (Levang, 1991, p. 105).

The pattern of the New Testament church was taken from the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles. Pentecost was the birthday of the church. It was also the day that the indwelling Holy Spirit descended, and the day three thousand believers were added to the infant church. Luke, in Acts 2:47, noted the continuing addition to church membership in the words: “The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” The church of the book of Acts was a congregation (or congregations) of believers. When there was open sin in the congregation, as in the instance of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), the Holy Spirit acted through Peter to remove the hypocrites from the church by an act of most severe church discipline (Levang, 1991, p. 116).

Levang notes that the epistles of Paul are written to churches and addressed to those called to be saints. From this, the Church of the Lutheran Brethren believes that church membership in a biblical congregation is open to those who are “truly converted, who by life and testimony bear evidence of a Christian life” (Levang, 1991, pp. 115-116).

Among the many church bodies that came out of Norwegian Lutheran Pietism, only the Church of the Lutheran Brethren refused to knowingly accept unsaved people into voting membership in the church. Other church bodies had practices and principles that emphasized or expressed hope that the church was composed of believers, but often the results were not consistent with the plans. Some church bodies included people who were considered to be on the way to salvation. Others were careful to only call believers to serve as pastors and select leaders. But the CLB alone insisted on a “believers only” membership.

This is not to say that the CLB believed there could actually be a “pure” congregation. The statement of faith notes that, “It cannot, however, be avoided that hypocrites might be mixed in the congregation; that is, those whose unbelief is not evident to the congregation.”

To be workable, this believers-only policy requires a willingness to practice church discipline. If we believe that a truly biblical congregation needs to be composed of people who are living in a right relationship with God through faith in Christ, then church discipline needs to be practiced faithfully. Even though he was one of the founders of the CLB, some years later K.O. Lundeberg resigned from the clergy roster and left the CLB over a case of failed church

discipline. From his action, we understand how important a disciplined church was to the founders.

The CLB has always had other reasons for existence that go beyond church membership, but it is remarkable to see how strongly the founders felt about this issue. The principle of the church being a fellowship of true believers remains highly valued.

The Church Universal

The Christian Church is composed of all those, and only those, in whom the Holy Spirit has worked the faith that their sins are forgiven on the basis of Christ's vicarious satisfaction.

Nothing else makes one a member of the Church: neither holding membership in a church body, nor outward use of the means of grace, nor profession of the Christian faith, nor filling an office in the Church, nor zeal for a moral life in imitation of Christ... Only personal faith in the forgiveness of sins which was purchased by Christ's *satisfactio vicaria* [vicarious atonement] and is proclaimed and dispensed in the Gospel makes one a member of the Christian Church (Pieper, 1950, vol. III, p. 397).

In Matthew 16:17-18, in response to Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." This is a volatile saying in the history of the Church, but one thing is clear. Whether Jesus is referring to himself or to Peter or to Peter's confession as the rock on which the Church will be built, the statement that Peter makes is fundamental to the existence of the Church. The Church is built around and on the confession of the reality that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The Church is about confession of Jesus as the Christ.

The word "confess" has two implications that apply in this case. A confession is a statement of faith, which Peter's statement is. The Church, then, is people who confess faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Another implication of confession is that it is a way of life: The Church is people who live their lives together as a corporate confession to others that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God.

As the Apostle Paul writes to the Church, he consistently refers to the church in two ways: as people who were baptized (see for example, Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12) and as people who are saints (1 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1).

The word that is translated *Church* means people who are called out for an assembly. It is the same word that would have been used to translate the Hebrew word for the gathering or assembly of the people of God. When we say, "We are going to church," we may be referring to a building at a specific address. But more properly, *going to Church* means that we are being gathered as the people of God.

Thus one version of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed reads: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, which is the communion of saints..."

The Church is one

The Nicene Creed, one of the ecumenical creeds and one of the oldest statements of Christian belief, states, "We believe...in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" (Bettenson, 1977, p. 28-29).

We say first that there is only one Church. We believe this because Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18), using the singular form for Church, and also because of Jesus' statement, "There will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

This Church is one in time and space. Wherever and whenever there are believers, they are part of this one Church. This is the only Christian Church that exists or has ever existed. People have always been saved by grace through faith. There is not one Church made up of people who got in by good works and another made up of people who got in by grace. There is one Church and it is "the grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone" Church.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians that "there is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Since all of that is true, the Church is to become just that. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). This unity has ministry effect because "from him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:16). Maturity in ministry happens as the church grows together, is held together, and works together.

Note the apologetic effect of this unity as expressed in Jesus' prayer. On the night that Jesus was going to die, Jesus prayed for his disciples, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:20-23).

The Church is holy

To be holy means to belong to God. The church is the communion of saints and to be a saint is to be holy. Peter writes to the first century Church, "You are... a holy nation, a people belonging to God... Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Since man by nature is inclined to imagine that mere outward affiliation with a church secures his salvation, the great practical importance of ever defining the Church as the communion of believers, or saints, and not as an "institution," an outward polity (*externa politia*), is

manifest. A person's membership in the Christian Church depends on his confessing that he deserves damnation before God and at the same time believing that God is gracious to him for the sake of Christ's *satisfactio vicaria* [substitutionary atonement] (Pieper, 1950, vol. III, p. 400).

The Church is chosen by God to be his. All things that belong to God are, by virtue of that belonging, holy. Holiness is first of all a status and then derivatively a way of acting. Christians are very conscious of the fact that they are simultaneously holy (saints) and sinners.

One reason that the Church belongs to God is because God is its creator. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). "God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

God makes us alive in Christ by working faith in us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. Referring to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, Martin Luther writes in the Large Catechism,

To this article, as I have said, I cannot give a better title than "Sanctification." In it is expressed and portrayed the Holy Spirit and his office, which is that he makes us holy. ...But God's Spirit alone is called Holy Spirit, that is, he who has sanctified and still sanctifies us (Tappert, 1959, p. 415).

The Church is holy because it is set apart for service to God. Isaiah wrote the servant songs that predicted the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the Gospel age. That mission to be a light to the nations is continued by the Church after the ascension of Christ Jesus. Peter writes about this, "You also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

The Church is catholic

The word *catholic* means universal; all true believers in Christ are members of this Church. It is "the whole family [of God] in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 3:15).

In one sense the Church catholic is invisible and is a matter of faith. We believe that it exists, but it is not something we can see infallibly. God knows the people who are his, but we don't.

There is also a sense in which this Church is visible because the Church is found where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. These are the marks of the Church and the means by which God creates the Church and by which the Church is sustained by God. (See 1 Peter 1:23-2:1.) The Church is also visible as people gather in a specific, geographical locality — the church in Philippi, for example.

Part of this Church is in heaven, triumphant; the rest of us are here in the world, militant.

This concept of the Church includes all the Christians who have died in the faith and gone to heaven, and all the Christians still living in this world. It is customary to distinguish between the Church militant on earth and the Church triumphant in heaven. The latter is so called, because, having been faithful unto death, these Christians have entered into their rest (Hebrews 4:9), and received a crown of life (Revelation 2:10; 2 Timothy 4:8). The Church militant is so called, because here on earth Christians wage a spiritual war, or battle, against the devil (Ephesians 6:10-11), the world (1 John 5:4), and their flesh (Galatians 5:17; 1 Corinthians 9:26-27); and it is by a victorious death that they enter the Church triumphant (2 Timothy 4:7-8) (Koehler, 1971, p. 238f).

There is no one on the face of the earth for whom there is a different Church than this one holy catholic apostolic Church.

The Church is apostolic

The Church has the foundation of apostolic Word and authority. This apostolic Word brings the members to faith and new life. The apostolic Word is the Word that calls the Church into existence by creating and sustaining faith in believers. The apostolic Word is the means by which the Holy Spirit creates the Church. As Paul writes, the Church is "built on the foundations of the prophets and apostles" (Ephesians 2:20). This Church is gathered by the Gospel and around the Gospel and its business is to proclaim the apostolic Gospel. It does not devise its own message, but continues to speak that which it received and which gives it birth and sustenance. This apostolic Word is also the standard by which faith and practice are measured.

Some understand the Church to be apostolic also in the sense of being sent into the world as a missionary. *Apostle* means sent out as an ambassador to act in the name of the sender. Paul writes, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). The Church is sent; it is deployed in the world as salt. It is a colony of heaven here on earth. It is a sign for this present age of the age to come.

Christ, the head of the Church, sends it to do its proclaiming work in ever expanding circles continuing to the ends of the earth.

The Church is Christian

This Christian Church is Christian because Christ made its existence possible and because its life revolves around following Christ. Its message is and has always been, "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

The Church as the gathered people of God

Disciples of Jesus are called the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the people of God, the bride of Christ, the household of God, and the Chosen people, among other names. One of the more common names for the people of God is Church.

While all believers are most intimately joined by faith to Christ, their

Savior, they are for this very reason also most intimately joined to one another by the bond of a common faith, a common hope, and a mutual love, and thus they constitute, no matter how far apart locally they may be from each other, a single body, a great communion, which we call the Church (Koehler, 1971, p. 238).

The word *Church* is the translation of the word *ekkleesia*, from which we get the word *ecclesiastic* — meaning a called out assembly, gathering, or congregation. So the primary meaning of *Church* is a gathering of people who have been called out. This primary meaning implies something that is visible and locatable. The Church is most true to its definition when it is gathered. It does not cease to be the people of God or the bride of Christ or the household of God or the chosen people when it is not gathered. But the word Church most applies to it when it is gathered together. The Church is an assembly of believers.

The characteristic that distinguishes this gathering from other gatherings is that these believers are gathered where “the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are rightly administered.” It is the Gospel and the sacraments that identify a gathering as the Church in any location. It doesn’t take many people for this to happen because it isn’t only the character of the people (although the church is an assembly of believers), but also that which gathers them (Word and sacrament) that make a gathering a church.

The local congregation — as a part of the universal, invisible Church — is an assembly of believers among whom the Gospel is taught and the sacraments are rightly administered. It is probable that whenever believers assemble around Word and sacrament that there are those among them who are not believers. This gathering is still properly called a church, even though not all in the congregation are part of the universal Church.

Jesus says in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church.” The English word *Church* probably comes from a word that means *belonging to the Lord*.

The triumphant Church

Those who are in heaven are called triumphant because they have entered into the full enjoyment of that victory. They no longer wrestle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12). They have entered into rest; they have been faithful unto death and have received the victor’s crown.

They are part of the same Church to which we belong. They have finished the course, they have run the race, they have kept the faith. They testify to us, “Do not fall back, do not give up, run with perseverance the race marked out for you. Get rid of the encumbrances; throw off the things that entangle. Fix your eyes on Jesus.” (See Hebrews 12:1-2.)

The invisible Church

The Christian Church consists of those who believe the Gospel. Only faith in Christ makes a person a member of the Church. Not the connection with an organized congregation, not the exposure to the means of grace, not even a profession of faith makes a person a member of the Christian Church.

We can judge false teachings (Matthew 7:15-23), but we cannot judge someone’s relationship to God. We can exercise church discipline when we see someone fall into sin, and we must do so. We must warn those who sin that sin leads to death. We must follow the instruction of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20 to treat an unrepentant person “as a pagan or a tax collector.”

But we cannot see the Church as God sees it. We can know in our own hearts whether we are part of the Church, but the Church is invisible to us in the sense that we cannot judge for sure whether anyone else is or is not part of the Church. God, on the other hand, knows those who are his, so the Church is not invisible to him. The true Church of Christ is the communion of saints and it is only visible to God.

According our Catechism, “I say “*I believe* in the Holy Christian Church,” because I know from God’s Word that this church exists, even though I cannot determine with certainty who its members are; and because I know that His church will always continue” (Olsen and Rinden 1992, p. 86). According to our Catechism we also say, “‘*The Holy Christian Church*’ because the true Church is one spiritual body, of which Christ is the head” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 87).

The visible Church

The church is more than a collection of believing individuals. The church is a community. Martin Luther wrote:

The [Apostles’] Creed calls the holy Christian church a *communio sanctorum*, “a communion of saints.” Both expressions have the same meaning. In early times the latter phrase was missing, and it is unintelligible in our translation. If it is to be rendered idiomatically, we must express it quite differently. The word *ecclesia* properly means an assembly. We, however, are accustomed to the term *Kirche*, “church,” by which simple folk understand not a group of people but a consecrated house or building. But the house should not be called a church except for the single reason that the group of people assembles there. For we who assemble select a special place and give the house its name by virtue of the assembly... In our mother tongue therefore it ought to be called “a Christian congregation or assembly,” or best and most clearly of all, “a holy Christian people” (Tappert, 1959, p. 416-417).

These things identify a community: individuals in relationship, having common identity, and going in the same direction. The Church is like that. People in the Church are related to each other by the fact of their common relationship to God in Christ. They have common identity in that they are the family of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, a royal priesthood, and other metaphors that signify plurality and unity. They are going in the same direction as they are following Christ in mission, headed for heaven.

The community practiced by the Church will be the evidence for the truthfulness of Christianity to the world. See Jesus’ prayer for unity, “This is how they will know” (John 17:23).

In this unity and oneness, the Church is also plural. John writes a letter from

Jesus “to the seven churches” in the province of Asia (Revelation 1:4). Paul implies this plurality when he writes to the church in Corinth, “I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you” (2 Corinthians 11:8).

Cyprian, a third century church father, wrote:

The Church is a unity; yet by her fruitful increase she is extended far and wide to form a plurality; even as the sun has many rays, but one light; and a tree many boughs but one trunk, whose foundation is the deep-seated root; and as when many streams flow down from one source, though a multitude seems to be poured out from the abundance of the copious supply, yet in the source itself unity is preserved (Bettenson, 1999, p. 79).

The Church, as it images God, is one as God is one and it is plural because God is three.

The Bible speaks of the Church as being visible as well. Jesus said if there is a need for discipline, “Tell it to the church” (Matthew 18:17). By this, he must have meant a visible, local body. Paul wrote his letters “to the church in Galatia” and “to the church in Thessalonica.” Jesus sent word to “the angel of the church in Sardis” and to “the angel of the church in Philadelphia.” We most commonly use *church* in this sense of a local congregation of believers. Our goal is to conform the visible Church to the invisible and to make the invisible Church visible.

When dealing with membership, a congregation has no right to include in its visible membership those who are not part of the invisible Church. When we speak of the work of the Church, we have no right to expect that it is going to be done by some invisible group and therefore do nothing ourselves.

According to our Catechism, “The Church is visible in this world when Christians unite around the Word and Sacraments and form congregations. These congregations may be organized into synods, denominations, or associations” (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 88).

In John 17: 20-23, Jesus prays for the unity of the Church so that the world would know that the Father sent the Son and that the Father loves the world. This requires a visible Church because people cannot see what is invisible. Furthermore, this visible Church becomes the evidence presented by God the Father for two very important issues: that God sent Jesus and that God loves the Church.

The militant Church

“Onward Christian Soldiers” is a hymn that is out of vogue in the modern Church. It expresses a sentiment that some think reminds the world of the Crusades of the Middle Ages. The truth expressed in this hymn reminds us that the Church in this world has a posture that is adversarial rather than mainstream. The hymn uses warfare imagery to describe the Christian life. This is true about the Church in this world. We are to be militant in our battle “against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world” (Ephesians 6:12).

In the history of the Church, the Eastern Church has often emphasized the resurrection of Christ as the chief event of redemption. The Western Church

has usually focused on the cross as the chief event of redemption. Neither is exclusive; it is rather a matter of emphasis. We recognize that this life is a life of bearing the cross in a world characterized by darkness. We are to shine as light in this darkness, which is to be countercultural.

We know that Christ has won the victory over sin and death and that resurrection is the assured future of the believer. This present life is lived in the middle of a dying world as a testimony to life. That is countercultural.

We know that there will be a resurrection and eternal life, but we live in a world that focuses on the present age — so our witness to eternity is countercultural.

We know that the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh war against our souls. We must always be vigilant as we await the coming of our Lord. So we speak of the Church as being militant in this life, and that is a good reminder to each of us. We will become part of the Church triumphant when Jesus returns or when we die in faith (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

Membership in a Local Congregation

The three ways in which a person may be affiliated with a Lutheran Brethren congregation are 1) by becoming a parishioner, 2) by becoming a baptized child of the congregation, and 3) by becoming a confessing member.

Parishioner

In the CLB brochure *Membership in a Lutheran Brethren Congregation*, the term *parishioner* is used in two ways. One is to describe all those who regularly attend a particular local church. The other is to describe parishioners in a more narrow way.

“We use the term Parishioner to include all the people who make this congregation their church home. Within this larger family, a person may also be affiliated in other ways. Parishioners constitute the largest circle in the church family... Baptized children of the congregation become Parishioners upon reaching voting age if they have not been received as confessing members” (Rinden, *Membership in a Lutheran Brethren Congregation*).

The local church pastoral staff is just as responsible for ministry to the parishioner as it is for ministry to the confessing member of the congregation. They perform the same tasks and duties for the parishioner as for the one who is a confessing member.

Baptized children of the congregation

When a child or infant is brought to the Lord in baptism by the parent, the child is baptized without receiving previous instruction, and through baptism is born into the Christian Church. Matthew 28:19-20 says that we should make all nations disciples of Christ by baptizing and teaching them. Therefore little children are made disciples of Christ through baptism and are then taught by Christian teachers to observe all that Christ has commanded.

Baptized children of a Lutheran Brethren congregation include children who have been baptized by the congregation as well as those previously baptized children who may have transferred into the congregation with their parents. Because children become members of the Christian Church through their baptism, the congregation shall endeavor diligently to instruct the children in the Word of God. The congregation shall arrange for religious schooling for each child by such means as Sunday school, Bible classes, youth ministries, pastoral instruction, confirmation and other Christian training programs where the young may be instructed by Christian teachers. These young people shall be made the objects of prayer as the congregation seeks to guide, train, and equip them for confessing membership in the church.

Our CLB tradition suggests that children not participate in holy communion during the years of their early childhood since they cannot properly examine themselves (1 Corinthians 11:28). During the period of confirmation the pastor and/or elders shall confer with each confirmand. Those who by life and testimony bear witness to a saving faith in Christ shall be encouraged to participate in the Lord's Supper and to present themselves to the board of elders for confessing membership.

After children are received into confessing membership, they remain non-voting members until they reach the age to vote as approved by their local congregation (18 or 21). If a baptized child is not received as a confessing member and has reached voting age, he or she then becomes a parishioner in the local congregation.

Confessing members

Confessing members shall have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, confess personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, maintain a good reputation in the community, and accept the Lutheran Brethren Statement of Faith and their local church constitution.

In many, if not most Lutheran Brethren congregations, the route to confessing membership begins in the Pastor's Class, Inquirer's Class, or New Member's Class. The name may vary, but the class serves the purpose of introducing people to the life and ministry of the local congregation. Upon (or near) completion of the class, prospective members are given a copy of the local church constitution and a membership application. If they find agreement with the constitution, and have a desire to unite with the congregation, their completed application for membership is usually forwarded to the pastor or board of elders. Most of the congregations of the CLB will request a visit between a representative of the church council or elder board and the prospective member regarding the application. The purpose of the visit is to talk about the significance of membership, answer questions about the congregation and denomination, and hear a confession of faith in Christ.

The application is usually forwarded to the church council and then to the congregation for acceptance. In most CLB congregations, the new members are publicly welcomed at the first worship or communion service after the business meeting at which they were accepted as members.

Membership transfers between CLB congregations often are a matter

of forwarding the paperwork. One can usually transfer membership without repeating the classes and visits.

The standards for membership — baptism, confession of faith, a good reputation, and acceptance of the constitution — are applied differently in various local congregations, but they could be summarized as follows:

- 1) Baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in connection with water is an act of God in the life of the person and is valid no matter where the baptism happened or who officiated. The validity of a baptism comes from the Word and promise of God, not the human circumstances. God has given a promise in baptism and he doesn't rescind that promise. If an adult who has strayed from the grace given in baptism comes again to repentance, the baptism need not be repeated since "to be rebaptized is to deny the promise of God given in baptism and which He has not taken back" (Olsen and Rinden, 1992, p. 126).
- 2) Confession of faith is a public testimony that one is resting in the finished work of Christ for assurance of salvation, emphasizing the vertical dimension of faith.
- 3) Maintaining a good reputation is bearing a public testimony of living in the grace of God, the horizontal dimension of faith. (Some congregations understand this to mean that if the church would discipline a member for a certain behavior, they would not accept a new member who is behaving in the same manner.)
- 4) Accepting the constitution involves agreement with the statement of faith and with the ways and practices of the congregation as outlined in the constitution of the congregation.

Study Questions

- 1) What are the advantages of church membership? Disadvantages?
- 2) What would you think about the idea of not having church membership? It is not apparent that the first church had membership rolls.
- 3) How aggressive should the church be in “recruiting” for membership?
- 4) What are some ways that this congregation’s membership practices could be improved?
- 5) How clearly has this congregation defined what it means to accept the constitution, confess faith in Christ, and have a good testimony in the community? By what standards are those qualities tested?

CHAPTER 10: CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The Church of the Lutheran Brethren practices the congregational form of church government [nationally] and the autonomy of the local congregations. The office of pastor and elder is to be filled by men only. The synodical administration has an advisory function as it relates to the congregation, and an administrative function as it relates to the cooperative efforts of the congregations.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph J

Introduction

This paragraph of the statement of faith draws our attention quickly and raises numerous questions: 1) How is the church supposed to run? 2) What is the function of the synod? 3) Why does the synod ask the churches for money? 4) What benefit do the churches get from being part of the synod? 5) What is the elder's job? 6) How do elders relate to the congregation? 6) What is the role of women in the church? 7) Who actually runs the church?

We affirmed earlier in this commentary that the Bible is the standard and source for faith and practice. What does the Bible say about church government?

The Old Testament teaches and demonstrates order very clearly. God laid down explicit rules about the priesthood (Exodus 28; Leviticus 8-10), the Levites (Deuteronomy 18:1-8), Judges (Deuteronomy 16:18-20), the monarchy (Deuteronomy 17:14-20), and the prophets (Deuteronomy 18:14-22) in the theocracy of Israel. One of the offices that is not explained in the Old Testament, but which is everywhere assumed and active, is the office of elder.

The New Testament ordinarily assumes order without giving such explicit instructions. Without explicitly saying that people *ought* to meet on Sunday, it simply speaks of *when* you meet on the first day of the week. Without commanding or explaining why there must be elders, Titus is instructed to appoint them. Issues of church discipline, letters of commendation, raising and disbursing money, and the selection of deacons assumes a visible group of people doing business together.

The New Testament also describes certain offices. Among them are: Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor-teacher, Deacon, Deaconess, Overseer, and Elder. As we look at church government we need to ask, "Which of these offices are appropriate to the church today?" We should also ask, "How might the church be organized today?"

The CLB Constitution states:

Christ is the Head of the Church. Through His Spirit He guides the Church by His Word. According to His Word, He bestows upon the Church gifts of grace necessary for the effectual performance of its various ministrations. Among these ministrations we especially emphasize the office of the pastor, the teaching and governing elders, evangelists, teachers, and deacons (CLB Constitution, Article IV, Paragraph C).

This is not to say that these are the only offices Christ has given to the church, but these are the ones that we emphasize.

On the local level, Lutheran Brethren congregations practice the Presbyterian form of church government that particularly emphasizes the office of elder.

The office of elder was part of the tribal pattern of life in the Old Testament, where by virtue of age and experience a person became one of the leaders of the community. Elders represented the people in the presence of God and managed the affairs of the community. In Exodus 3:16-18, Moses was given an assignment by God to assemble the elders of Israel and tell them what God had in mind. Then Moses and the elders were to go to the king of Egypt and ask for

the release of the people. The elders were assembled to hear the words of Moses before he died and, on behalf of the people, accept responsibility for loyalty to the covenant and obedience to the Law (Deuteronomy 31:28).

The authority of the elders was seldom challenged; they were the men who controlled the local community. In Exodus 24:1, Moses chooses 70 of the elders to form a representative body of elders. There were more than 70 elders, but these 70 were selected to be representative of the representatives. This ethnic office then took on divine commission as they were given this new status in the people of God.

The elders made military, political, and judicial decisions. They made sure that the Law was taught and practiced. They were the representatives and guardians of the Jewish community in exile.

After the exile, we see a new council of elders called the Sanhedrin. Eventually, this council was expanded to include priestly representatives along with the lay elders.

In the New Testament era, the office of elder became the chief pastoral office in the church. In Acts 20:28-31 and 1 Peter 5:1-4, elders are charged with the task of shepherding the church (office of pastor) and overseeing the church (office of bishop). Additionally, it is clear that the congregation is God's flock, but that it has been entrusted to their care. "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care" (1 Peter 5:2). It is also apparent that this relationship is one that has been established by God. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28).

In Protestant churches today, this office is seen in three different ways:

- 1) The New Testament office of elder is in practice the office of pastor. The elder/pastor is the minister of Word and sacrament in the congregation.
- 2) The New Testament office of elder is actually two offices: the minister of Word and sacrament (or teaching elder) and the lay, ruling elder. While the minister of Word and sacrament is called by God to shepherd the flock by speaking the Word of God to the people, the lay *governing* or *ruling* elder is called by God to represent the people and to shepherd the flock by watching over the application and practice of the Word preached.
- 3) The New Testament of elder is one office that is held by a plurality of persons who all have the same office of shepherd and overseer of the flock, but who may practice that office in different ways depending on needs of the congregation and gifts of the persons holding the office. The Church of the Lutheran Brethren view of an elder combines the second and third options. The minister of Word and sacrament is an elder whose calling is to shepherd the flock by attending to the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. The lay elders are potentially teaching or ruling elders. In other words, their office could involve teaching the Word or it could be a less public work of private pastoral care — thus helping people apply the Word to their lives.

The idea of a governing elder comes from 1 Timothy 5:17, which reads, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double

honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." From this, we are led to believe that not all elders worked at preaching and teaching, although all directed the affairs of the church. Those in the latter category are often called *ruling elders*. It is important to understand that the idea of ruling comes from a family setting, not a governmental or business setting. In 1 Timothy 3:4-5, this same concept is used in talking about a father who manages his own family. The model of the ruling elder is the father who cares for his family.

It should also be noted that 1 Timothy 5:17 does not prescribe the office of ruling elder, but merely states that the elder who rules well is worthy of double honor. The text does not say that there should be such an office, but that those who do that work are worthy of compensation for their work.

The Denomination: Forms of Church Government

While the CLB uses a Presbyterian government on the local level, it practices a congregational form of government on the national or denominational level (see below).

In the New Testament, it is hard to find a single pattern of government and organization in the congregations. In some, like Corinth, there is an emphasis on people exercising gifts rather than holding offices. In other places, overseers and deacons are addressed. Titus is instructed to appoint elders in Crete. "All of this simply points out that the New Testament has a variety of patterns of church organization and ministry or service coexisting together at the same time, with variation from locality to locality" (Johnson and Webber, 1993, p. 345).

J. Orton Wiley (1963, vol. III, p. 118f) writes that there are three views of Church organization:

- 1) The Church is spiritual and needs no external organization.
- 2) The Scriptures prescribe a formal plan of organization for the Church.
- 3) The New Testament lays down general principles of organization without sanctifying any one form.

Wiley says that position one is illogical, position two is held both by those who advocate the Episcopal form (described below) on one hand and the congregational form on the other, but that the third alternative seems most biblical. He quotes Charles Wesley as saying that he (Wesley) believed in the Episcopal form, but did not believe that the Bible prescribed it.

We now consider three forms of church government.

Episcopal

Episcopalians believe that the New Testament teaches three church offices: bishop/overseer, elder/pastor, and deacon/deaconess. The bishop succeeds the apostle; for example, Titus and Timothy are seen as bishops who act in the Apostle Paul's name and receive their authority from him.

The Episcopalian form affirms that the church and the ministry of the church are held in the hands of the clerical hierarchy. The clergy establish the church and transmit the blessings of the church and manage the affairs of the church. The Roman Catholic Church government is a form of Episcopalianism, having the Pope as the final authority. He selects the bishops and establishes

truth in his teaching office. The sacraments can only be distributed through his authorized and ordained agents — he, himself, being a successor to the Apostle Peter.

Many Methodists also use the Episcopalian form, with bishops being the final authority in the church. The Anglican Church, Episcopal Church, and some Lutheran Churches are Episcopal in government.

There is little doubt that the major form of church government that arose in the post-apostolic age was Episcopal. When theological questions and challenges arose in a time before written theology texts, the church needed the bishop as the standard for orthodox teaching. In a time of persecution, it was important to have someone who had clear leadership responsibility.

From a scriptural point of view, the Episcopal model makes distinctions between bishops and elders where there may not be any. The two offices seem to be identical in the New Testament.

The strengths of the Episcopal form of government include simplicity in decision-making, economy of action, and strong oversight of the church. In addition, the local congregation can find help from outside (the bishop) to find resolution to an internal problem. As for weaknesses, “What if you get a bad bishop?” There is also the potential for a lack of ownership of church mission by the local congregation.

Presbyterian

Presbyterianism emphasizes the importance of the elders, or presbyters. The elders represent the laity, and a college of elders is often the body that assumes final authority in most matters of the church. The elders lead and care for the church. Pastors and elders are members of the ruling assembly and along with deacons are the ministry team.

Leaders are chosen, elected, appointed, or called by the laity, to represent the laity and make decisions for them, without the laity being involved in every decision.

Presbyterianism became a very popular form of church government at the time of the Protestant Reformation and is practiced by many of the “reformed” churches, including that branch to which it gave its name.

There is no question that there were places where the Presbyterian form of government was practiced in the New Testament. (See Acts 15 and Hebrews 13:17.)

The strengths of the Presbyterian system are similar to some of the oversight strengths of the Episcopalian system with the added benefits of plurality in leadership. Also, the elders who are making decisions in the church in the Presbyterian system are informed on the issues and in biblical knowledge. The weakness is that decision-making can become slow, and either the presbytery (leadership over a group of congregations) or the local session (leadership of a single congregation), or both, may become isolated and self-perpetuating.

Congregational

Congregationalism emphasizes that the church is made up of all believers

and therefore, at the congregational level, all authority in the church should be exercised by the laity of that congregation. Congregationalism emphasizes the idea of the priesthood of all believers, that Christ is present as the head of the church, and that he is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name. In this system of government the local congregation is independent and autonomous in its relationship to other local congregations, as well as to district, national, or international organizations. Those bodies exist merely to facilitate cooperative ventures such as missions, education, and other activities that are too large for a local congregation to effectively manage alone.

Congregationalism resembles the old “town hall democracy” kind of government. Decisions made by the elected leaders are ratified by the vote of the constituency. The people in the congregation can easily initiate legislation and make decisions.

Congregationalism is practiced in most baptistic groups as well as in the denomination that bears its name. It is especially attractive to people who believe strongly in government by majority vote.

A strength of the congregational form of government is involvement in the decision process by those who are going to have to live with the decision. This involvement respects each of God’s people and helps them commit to the course they have chosen. The weakness is that people may make decisions without the advantage of good or adequate information.

So what is the one right form of church government? Scripture gives no prescriptive passage and the descriptive ones are not unified. In some places we see strong democratic/ congregational elements, in others we see monarchical/ Episcopal elements. In others the elders/presbyters are apparently in charge. “Each church adopted a pattern which fit its individual situation” (Erickson, 1985, p. 1084).

The CLB has adopted a pattern fitting its own situation. We have a congregational approach to the synodical organization, but use a modified Presbyterian style at the local level. Each congregation has autonomy in relation to the synod, but is governed locally by a board of elders.

The Local Congregation

Autonomy

Autonomy means one makes his or her own laws. *Auto* means *self* and *nomos* means *law*. “I am a law unto myself.” In the CLB form of church government, this means that the local congregation is self-governing. The synod does not intervene in the affairs of the local congregation unless invited to do so.

The local congregation does not function with complete independence from its CLB sister churches and the shared synod structure. When a congregation chooses to be a member of the CLB, its members agree to adopt and adhere to the CLB constitution and statement of faith. The congregation’s constitution and statement of faith will be in harmony with those of the CLB. As a CLB member church, the congregation has also made a decision to align with other

congregations for purposes of joint ventures of faith. The most obvious joint ventures are the denominational ministries that are actually shared extensions of the ministries of all the local churches.

Local church autonomy implies freedom in those areas where the CLB constitution and statement of faith are silent. It also means that the local congregation owns its property, handles its own finances and determines its own budget. The local congregation decides how large an investment it will make in the joint ministry ventures. The synod does not place a levy on the congregation. The congregation voluntarily supports these ministries based on its commitment to its sister churches that make up the CLB.

The congregation also has freedom to call the pastor of its choosing. The called pastor must be on the CLB clergy roster or be eligible to be placed on the roster. But the synod does not assign pastors to congregations or move them from one church to another, as might happen in an Episcopal system.

When the local congregation experiences internal trouble, the synod does not automatically become involved. Synod officials are available to assist when invited by the congregation, congregational officers or the pastor.

The office of pastor and elder

Of the leadership positions exercised in the New Testament, we see the continuing need for the offices of elder, bishop, pastor and deacon. Nearly every form of church government makes allowance for these offices.

If we read carefully, it seems that the offices of elder, bishop, and pastor are all different ways of talking about the same office. The concept of elder comes out of the villages of Israel and the local synagogues. An elder was someone who had achieved some level of respect, status, and wisdom based on the fact of his age, maturity and experience. Gray hair was a sign of God's blessing in a culture where the expected life span may have been less than forty years. Bishop is a title that expresses oversight and authority. Pastor is an agrarian term that literally means shepherd.

There are two roles within this office: 1) the pastor and teacher referred to in Ephesians 4:11 as one who shepherds by teaching, and 2) the ruling elder of 1 Timothy 5:17 who shepherds by helping people apply the Word to life. It is possible for the same person to be involved in both of these roles.

In 1 Peter 5:1-5a, the Apostle Peter calls himself a fellow elder. He addresses the elders in the church and instructs them to pastor God's flock by serving as bishops.

We remember Jesus' words after the resurrection when he tells Peter to care for Jesus' sheep (John 21:15-17).

From Peter's point of view, pastor, elder, and bishop all refer to different dimensions of the same office. Paul agrees when he addresses the elders of Ephesus at Miletus. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (bishops). Be shepherds (pastors) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). It is also clear from Paul and Peter that God created the office of elder in the congregation and that the Holy Spirit puts specific people into the office.

In the Church of the Lutheran Brethren, we generally divide these roles into different offices. The person who holds the office of pastor has special responsibility for teaching. His training and examination for ordination are different from those who hold the office of elder. The reason is that his role is, in the words of Ephesians 4:11, "pastor and teacher." He feeds the flock the Word of God. He shepherds the flock by teaching clear doctrine, warning about false doctrines that shipwreck faith.

Those who hold the office of elder also have the responsibility to shepherd the flock. Together with the pastor, they exercise oversight. They also are expected to be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). They are expected to watch out for the wolves that would ravage the flock, but their ordination and examination are not designed for the primary teaching role. It is worth noting that in the ordination rite for elders, the service is almost identical to that of the pastor with one very notable exception.

Will you watch over the flock in which you are placed an overseer, show yourself a pattern in good works, care for the spiritual growth and discipline of the congregation, and let no false teaching which is contrary to God's Word makes its way into the church? (Ministerial Acts: 1993, p. I-11).

The person who holds the office of pastor does not work for the elders and he is not in charge of the elders. The board of elders is a group of people who share the same calling to the spiritual care of the congregation, exercising that office as peers without a spiritual or organizational hierarchy.

Qualities desired in an elder are found in Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7. The lists are different, indicating that there was not one hard, fast rule for all times and places, but the similarities demonstrate the things that are important. Outside of the issue of being a recent convert, the list is one that should apply to all believers. Therefore, it seems that the pastor/elder/bishop should be one who is a good reflection of the church. A church leader will be growing in these areas of life:

Titus 1:5-9

blameless
 husband of one wife
 children disciplined
 not overbearing
 not quick-tempered
 not given to drunkenness
 not violent
 not pursuing dishonest gain
 hospitable
 love what is good
 self-controlled
 upright
 Holy
 disciplined
 sound in doctrine

1 Timothy 3:1-7

above reproach
 husband of one wife
 temperate
 self-controlled
 respectable
 hospitable
 able to teach
 not given to drunkenness
 not violent
 gentle
 not quarrelsome
 not a lover of money
 manage his family well
 not a recent convert
 good reputation with outsiders

Additionally, it was apparently acceptable for one to aspire to the position of bishop. While James warns that “not many of you should presume to be teachers” (James 3:1), Paul affirms that it is a “noble task” (1 Timothy 3:1) and if someone sets his heart on it, he desires a good thing.

The “men only” clause

The basis for this section is the CLB Position Paper, Role of Women in the Church: Implications for Suffrage, March 1988. See also, The Committee Report on the Role of Women in the Church, April 1987. These documents are available through the CLB Office of President. The affirmations that follow are from the Position Paper.

Affirmation 3: God created both male and female in His image. He created them equal though different. He gave them dominion over the created world, and commanded them to be fruitful and to increase in number.

In Genesis 1, Adam and Eve were each created in the image of God and both of them were blessed by God and were given the royal commission to fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over creation.

In Genesis 2, a distinction is uncovered and the relationship between man and woman is revealed. Adam is seen as having leadership in the relationship, pictured for one thing in the naming of Eve. As two persons sharing equally in God’s creation and commission, Adam is given leadership *before the fall in Genesis 3*.

Man and woman are equal in creation, equally fallen, and equally restored in God’s redemptive plan (they both received the skins for covering).

In the culture of the Old Testament, women were usually considered to be a kind of property — very valuable, but property. Their rights within the family were limited; their rights outside the family were nearly non-existent. Yet there are occasions where God called and equipped women to be significant people in leadership, both political and spiritual: Miriam was important in the Exodus (Exodus 15:20-21; Micah 6:4), Deborah was a prophetess and a judge (Judges 4:8-9; 5:7), and Huldah was a prophetess (2 Kings 22:14-20).

Joel prophesies a day when men and women will both be gifted for service in the kingdom of God (Joel 2:28-32).

The New Testament record contains the accounts of many women involved in service to the kingdom of God. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied concerning Mary and Jesus. Women were an ever-present part of Jesus’ ministry entourage. Mary Magdalene was the first witness to Jesus resurrection. Both men and women prophesied on the day of Pentecost in fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. Philip had four daughters who prophesied. Priscilla instructed Apollo, as well as her own husband Aquila. Lydia was a leader in the church at Philippi. Romans 16 contains the names of many women involved in the work of the church.

Affirmation 6: The Bible teaches that there is an office of public ministry in the church, the office of overseer (pastor and elder). It is

to be filled only by Scripturally qualified men (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1; 1 Timothy 5:12; 2 Timothy 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:12).

Affirmation 7: The Bible teaches that the Order of Creation which provided the authority structure of the family also provides the pattern for the church (Genesis 1,2; 1 Corinthians 11; 1 Timothy 2).

Ephesians 5:21-6:4 gives instruction on the role of husband and wife in marriage and home. The husband is to submit to his wife by loving her in a sacrificial manner, as Christ loved the Church. His leadership is characterized as nurture and care for his wife and children — not domination.

In the Church this model gives instruction to women to honor and respect their husbands (1 Corinthians 11:2-16). In 1 Timothy 2, women are instructed to learn in quietness and submission. Paul says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” The parallelism in the phrases “to teach” and “to have authority” explains that the kind of teaching specifically prohibited is that which exercises the authority of the pastoral office. To give proper respect to the Holy Spirit’s word through the apostle, we cannot apply this phrase in arbitrary ways but must understand it for what it says. It does not eliminate women from every activity in the church. It does not eliminate women from voting in congregational meetings. And the quietness commended is that of a good learner, it is not absolute silence as 1 Corinthians 11:5 makes clear.

Affirmation 8: The Bible distinguishes between office and gift. All members of the body of Christ, men and women alike, may possess any of the gifts as the Holy Spirit wills, but not all members may be appointed to all offices (1 Corinthians 12:11; Romans 12; Ephesians 4).

This affirmation reminds us that the Holy Spirit pours out his gifts on whom he wills. As the gifts are given to the church, the giver expects that the receiver will be a good steward of those gifts. It does not follow that a gift demands exercise in a specific office. Some observations about these gifts (*Role of Women in the Church: Implications for Suffrage*, 1988, p. 16):

- 1) “While it is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to give gifts, it is the responsibility of the institutional church to call or elect for office or service. It may or may not choose to use any gifted person as it sees fit.”
- 2) “The use of the gifts is under the authority of the body, the church (1 Corinthians 14:26-40).”
- 3) “Aside from the gender restrictions on the office of pastor/teacher that we have shown previously, there is no absolute prohibition on women teaching.” But teaching authority for the church resides in the office of pastor and elder.

Functions of the Synod

Advisory function

Regarding the relationship between local congregation and synodical administration, the CLB constitution notes, “The Synod has an advisory function rather than a ruling function” (Article III, Paragraph F). This advisory function includes such areas as the calling of a pastor, theological concerns, local church financial matters, local or regional mission outreach efforts, or any other area in which the congregation desires input from the synod.

In the case of local church discipline problems, the congregation has the option of granting some measure of authority to the synod. When it comes to doctrinal disagreement and pastoral ordination, the synod is the final authority.

It may also... expel a local congregation from membership in the Synod if the congregation no longer reflects the position of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. It may also revoke the ordination of a pastor for doctrinal, moral, or other sufficient reasons (CLB constitution, Article III, Paragraph F).

Administrative function

It is very important to understand that the synodical structure is in place for the benefit of the congregations. The synod’s goal is to support the congregations in their obedience to the great commission. This means that the joint ministry ventures, which are sometimes perceived as being the “synod’s ministries,” are actually the combined and voluntary activities of the whole family of local congregations.

The relationship of the synod to these cooperative efforts of the congregations is described as administrative. By administrative, we mean organizing, supervising, fundraising, managing the financial aspects, and otherwise supporting the joint efforts of the CLB congregations.

When a synod staff person visits a congregation or its members, or when the synod sends information or requests financial or prayer support, it is always on the authority that the local congregation has already delegated to the synod to pursue certain ministry ventures. The congregation is then given an opportunity to support the workers it has called to carry out the congregation’s ministry beyond its own community.

The synod’s ongoing joint ministry ventures on behalf of all the CLB congregations include international and North American missions, training of pastors and other church leaders, and ministry to or involving specific groups of people, such as women and youth. Shorter-term specific cooperative ministry projects may take place between the synod and a local church or a group of churches.

The synod also provides congregations with administrative support, in financial matters, for example, and resource support, in published materials, for example.

Study Questions

- 1) What is the congregational form of government and why do we practice it in the Church of the Lutheran Brethren?
- 2) In church government we should be aware that the authority to govern comes from God, rather than from the consent of the ones governed. How does God give this authority? To whom does he give it? What is the difference between authority and responsibility?
- 3) On the subject of local autonomy, what are the advantages and disadvantages? Can you support these ideas from Scripture?
- 4) Why do we believe that teaching authority in the church rests in the office of pastor and elder and is reserved for men only?
- 5) What does it mean to be the head, in the light of Ephesians 5:21-33 and Mark 10:42-45?
- 6) What is the nature of the relationship between the congregation and the synod?

CHAPTER 11: THE CONFESSIONS

The Lutheran Confessions are a summary of Bible doctrines. We adhere to the following confessional writings: The Apostles' Creed, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, unaltered Augsburg Confession, and Luther's Small Catechism.

—Church of the Lutheran Brethren Doctrinal Statement of Faith, Paragraph K

Confessions and Creeds

In 1580, Lutheran theologians placed the Three Chief Symbols at the beginning of the *Book of Concord* and called them “catholic” or “ecumenical” symbols since they asserted Lutheranism’s claim to continuity with all of Christendom. These three symbols of the ancient church are the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

There are a number of documents in addition to these which arose out of all the controversy stirred up in the Reformation: The Smalcald Articles, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, the Larger Catechism and others. These documents are valuable, but we do not say that we adhere to them.

We adhere to the confessions because we believe they represent the basic teaching position of the church; they speak of the way we understand Scripture. “Since the Confessions insist on being recognized as exposition of Scripture, only that response takes them seriously which affirms or rejects them on the basis of Scripture” (Schlink, 1961, p. xix).

We do not accept the confessions as a substitute for the Scriptures. We do not accept them as the authorized interpreter of Scripture. We do not accept them as having equal authority to Scripture. We accept them only because we believe that they are an accurate summary of what the Bible teaches.

Schlink quotes the Apology, “With a *single* statement of the apostle Peter we may cheerfully oppose thousands of quotations from the church fathers (Ap. XII, 70)” (Schlink, 1961, p. 3).

Our response is to study the confessions in the light of Scripture.

The Apostles' Creed

History of the Creed

The Apostles’ Creed dates back to the 8th century in its present form, but is based on the ancient Roman creed called the Old Roman Symbol, which has been dated as early as 100 AD. It is Trinitarian in outline with an extended, detailed confession of Christ. It is most commonly used in the baptism service, in the Lord’s Supper, often in worship services, and is the basis of the second main part of Luther’s Small Catechism. The Large Catechism also explains the Christian faith on the basis of the Apostles’ Creed.

The Apostles’ Creed has been used in the worship of the church as the confession of the person to be baptized and as part of the liturgy because of its “objective expression to the contents of subjective faith” (Allbeck, 1952, p. 24).

It also has been used extensively as a teaching tool. In ancient times, it was used as the basis for instructing the candidate for baptism and in more recent times as one of the core subjects of confirmation instruction.

It has also been used to combat heresy. As we trace the development of the Creed, we will see how the truths of the Creed were used to instruct or refute those who misunderstood or opposed the Christian faith.

Content of the Creed

The first article of the Creed may not have been necessary for Jewish converts to Christianity who needed to add faith in Christ to their Old Testament belief in God. But the conversion of pagan Gentiles and the trinitarian formula for baptism called for an expression concerning God (Allbeck, 1952, p. 26).

The Old Roman Symbol began, “I believe in God the Father, Almighty.” The word *Father* carries with it the understanding of God as our creator and of God as the Father who gives us new birth through his redeeming love revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ, his Son. The phrase “maker of heaven and earth” was added later. It expresses faith that God the Father is the God of Genesis 1:1. It may have been added to combat the teachings of the Gnostics and Marcion, who refused to believe that the Creator God of the Old Testament was the Almighty. In their separation of spirit and matter, they determined that matter was evil. Therefore they concluded that the Almighty could not have created this matter.

The second article is more extensive, expressing the basic convictions of the apostolic church concerning Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. That he was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary is affirmed in the face of those (Docetists, for example) who deny his humanity, his historicity, or his deity. His identification with Pontius Pilate also emphasizes his historicity. His humanity is further identified in that he suffered, was crucified, dead and buried. The descent into hell, based on 1 Peter 3:19 (compare Ephesians 4:9-10), asserts his complete and total triumph over the powers of evil. In the order given in 1 Peter 3, we believe that Jesus preached victory in hell after his resurrection, before his appearance to the disciples and the women. “He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:18b-19). The resurrection on the third day affirms the conviction of all Christians that their Lord is alive.

The third article confesses faith in the Holy Spirit. The holy Christian Church, as the Church of true believers (the communion of saints), is created by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit applying God’s grace through Word and sacrament. The forgiveness of sins is affirmed in the face of those who question the right of restoration for sinners. The resurrection of *the flesh*, later translated *body*, opposes those who taught that the physical body was inherently evil, and affirms that God will restore physical life at the consummation.

The Apostles’ Creed is extremely concise, yet at the same time is fairly comprehensive as an outline for instruction and a liturgical confession of faith.

The Nicene Creed

History of the Creed

In the early centuries of the Church, it started to differ along geographical lines: East Mediterranean and West Mediterranean. In general terms, the Eastern Church grew up under the influence of Constantinople and the Western Church grew up under the influence of Rome. The Apostles’ Creed is now used

primarily in the Western Church, while the Nicene is more common in the East. The Nicene Creed — a modification of earlier creeds, the most important of which was probably the creed of Caesarea — was revised at Nicaea in 325 and at Constantinople in 381. The Councils at Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) reaffirmed the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. It became part of the Western Church’s order of worship in the 6th century.

Arianism arose in the early 4th century and through its teachings diminished the essential deity of Christ. Through the preaching of Arius and the popular songs he wrote, the heresy spread quickly. In response to this heresy, the Nicene Creed was important as an expression of the full deity of Jesus Christ.

The Nicene Creed is used as a teaching tool in the Eastern Church more than in the West. In the Eastern Church, it is used as an outline for teaching the young and as a basis for doctrinal preaching and teaching. Its history shows its value in countering heresy.

Content of the Creed

Like the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene is Trinitarian in form. In the first article, it adds the thought of creation of all things visible and invisible. The second article is the most extensive, addressing the person of Christ, which was the main issue in the debate that spawned this form of the Creed. Phrases like “begotten, not made,” “God of God, Light of Light, Life of Life,...very God of very God,...of one substance with the Father,” all serve to emphasize the essential deity of Christ. “The interest in the Apostles’ Creed was to defend his true humanity, and subsequent phrases in the Nicene Creed make the same defense. But it is the declaration of faith in the divine nature of Christ which is distinctive of the Nicene Creed” (Allbeck, 1952, p. 36).

Statements concerning redemption were also added to the Creed of Eusebius (Caesarea) in the Nicene Creed since the Arian doctrine undermined Christ’s ability to save us and thus jeopardized our salvation. “The dominant redemptive interest is indicated by the words ‘for us men, and for our salvation’ and ‘crucified for us’” (Allbeck, 1952, p. 37).

The third article is fuller than the Apostles’ Creed because of later heresies that were addressed at Constantinople. The problem of the person of the Holy Spirit, the deity of the Holy Spirit, and the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son needed to be addressed.

As the result of over 150 years (including preparatory creeds and Chalcedon affirmation) of theological study, the Nicene Creed is a “valuable guardian of orthodox faith... It is the victorious monument of a great doctrinal struggle in the past. It still carries with it the echoes of battle as it serves the present age in a declaration of full-blooded Christian faith” (Allbeck, 1952, p. 40).

The Athanasian Creed

History of the Creed

The Athanasian Creed is a doctrinal statement of the Trinity and dates back to somewhere between the 5th and 7th century. It is named for Athanasius, a

defender of the doctrine of the Trinity, but who died before the Creed was written. The content of the Creed is partially attributed to Ambrose and Augustine, but the author and the actual date of composition are unknown. Additionally, it was not originally thought to be a creed, but a theological composition. So the Athanasian Creed is not Athanasian, nor is it a creed (Allbeck, 1952, p. 41).

Content of the Creed

The first section is Trinitarian. Three persons are affirmed in one Deity. The oneness does not obliterate the distinction between persons, and the identity of the persons does not obliterate the unity of essence (Allbeck, 1952, p. 44).

The three persons are equal in every respect: eternity, majesty, power, and comprehension (without bounds or limit). Each person is God and therefore possesses these attributes.

The second section is about the person of Christ. It says that he is perfect God and perfect man, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds, of the substance of his mother, born in the world. He is equal to the Father as touching his deity, inferior to the Father as touching his humanity, yet one Christ.

In the beginning, at the end, and in the middle, the Creed says, “whoever will be saved” must have this faith.

To say that this is the faith necessary for salvation does not mean that every layman must be a theologian, or that every simple-hearted Christian must know all the theological implications of devout truth in Christ. But it does mean that theological opinions opposed to these doctrines do stand in the way of true faith in Christ, and therefore of salvation (Allbeck, 1952, p. 45).

The Unaltered Augsburg Confession

History of the Confession

The Augsburg Confession is the fundamental declaration of faith of the Lutheran Church. Its presentation at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 made ecclesiastical and political history. It was written by Philip Melancthon, but represents the work of scholars, theologians, princes, and chancellors who accepted the reformation theology of Martin Luther.

Based solidly on the Scriptures and the Gospel to which it bears witness, it is so clear and courageous a testimony of evangelical faith that after more than four centuries it is still the principal ‘symbol’ of the Lutheran Church, holding a position second only to the Scriptures themselves (Bodensieck, 1965, p. 133).

Emperor Charles V called the Diet of Augsburg on January 21, 1530. The Diet was to convene on April 8; but it did not actually get started until June. The intent of the Diet was to settle the differences in the German states, to regain the military and financial support of the princes there for the defense of the empire against the Turks, and to erase the stigma attached to Charles for the religious problems of his empire. Charles was very conciliatory in his manner of calling

the Diet, but unfortunately he did not completely understand the issues involved in the Reformation nor did he understand the determination of the papacy to wipe out the heretics.

The reformers in Germany were encouraged by the calling of the Diet and believed that the Roman Church would present a position paper and the two sides would be able to deal with the questions. The papal party had no such intention.

Duke John, successor to Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony ordered the Wittenberg theologians to meet him in Torgau in March and bring written depositions, which they were to compose in all haste, dealing with all the disputed points. Their task was to explain the changes they had made in their congregations. They felt it would be wise to defend these changes on the basis of Scripture and the church fathers, thus justifying what they had done. This document was called the *Torgau Articles*.

When the reformers, on their way to Augsburg, discovered that the Romanist theologian John Eck had been circulating an inflammatory, anti-Lutheran pamphlet, Melancthon and the others realized that something more than the *Torgau Articles* needed to be presented.

Melancthon drafted the Augsburg Confession by consulting with the Marburg Articles, the Schwabach Articles, and Luther’s writings *Concerning Christ’s Supper* and *Instruction by the Visitors*. He then submitted the Confession to Luther for approval. After Luther’s approval was relayed, Melancthon continued to work on the manuscript almost right up to the time it was submitted to the Emperor. Whether or not Luther approved of the final form is debated, but it is probable that he saw it and approved.

Originally, the Confession was to be that of Electoral Saxony only, but other groups asked if they could also sign. The Confession was put in final form and adopted on June 23. It was signed by the Elector of Saxony, six or seven other territorial princes, and the official representatives of two other cities.

Charles did not want a public reading of the Confession. When the Lutherans insisted, he consented but arranged to have it read in a small hall that would exclude as many people as possible. The reader read it in such a strong voice that people in the courtyard heard it.

It was presented and read before the emperor and dignitaries on June 25. It took two hours to read it; the emperor fell asleep. The original German text was lost and the Latin text was in Brussels until 1569 when it was taken to Spain and probably destroyed.

The Roman Catholics prepared an answer and there was a conference of theologians. When common ground could not be found, Melancthon began writing the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*. The Emperor said the issue had come to a conclusion and gave the Lutherans seven months to submit.

The Confession found its way into print, against the orders of the Emperor. In 1531, Melancthon published an “authorized version” that contained some editorial changes from the one presented to the Emperor. After 1531, editions continued to appear, with slight changes in phraseology.

In 1540, however, changes were made in doctrinal positions, particularly in the article on the Lord’s Supper. On this doctrine Melancthon had modified

Luther's position to the degree that it approached Calvinism. The article on the Lord's Supper was phrased in such an ambiguous way that either Lutherans or Calvinists could see their interpretation in it.

When a controversy arose between strict Lutherans and those secretly Calvinistic (Crypto-Calvinists), the difference in language became apparent and important. The Crypto-Calvinists insisted on using the 1540 changed edition — therefore called the *Variata* — whereas the Lutherans adhered to the 1531 edition — the *Invariata* or “Unaltered Augsburg Confession.” Strictly speaking, of course, there is no published “unaltered” Confession, for every edition has some editorial changes from the text given the emperor. But these changes are unimportant, whereas the differences between the *Variata* and the *Invariata* are of confessional significance (Allbeck, 1952, p. 52).

Content of the Confession

There are two parts to the Confession. The first deals with doctrine, the second with abuses in the church.

The first three articles cover the standard ecumenical issues of Trinity, fallen man, and Christ. Lutherans agree with the long history of the Church in affirmation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and against Arianism. Article II implies that the Roman Catholic view of original sin is semi-Pelagian and the Lutherans identify with Augustine. In Article III, *Concerning the Son of God*, it was made clear that the sacrifice of Christ was sufficient for original sin, all other sin, and to satisfy the wrath of God. Therefore masses were not to be considered a sacrifice for daily sins. (See Tappert, 1959, p. 58.)

In Article IV, justification by grace alone is expounded, the heart of the reformation. “Eck was not misrepresenting Luther when he quoted him as saying, ‘Faith alone justifies, not works; because faith and works directly antagonize; hence works cannot be taught without injuring faith’” (Allbeck, 1952, p. 69). Melancthon began by rejecting Pelagianism, which stated that men could be justified before God on the basis of their works.

Because faith is dependence, it makes God rather than men the origin and center of salvation. Because faith is trust in the atonement, it honors Christ and clings to him. Since faith stands forth as the only means of receiving justification and is the root from which all other virtues stem, the antithesis of faith, viz., unbelief is the greatest of all sins (Allbeck, 1952, p. 71).

In Article V, Melancthon presents the means of grace as it relates to ministry and to the work of the Holy Spirit. In Article VI, the relationship of works to justifying faith is explained.

Articles VII through XIII fill in the details of the first six articles: the Church, the sacraments, confession and repentance.

Articles XIV through XXI address the implications of justification by faith: Church order as it relates to vocation, rites, ceremonies, and traditions in the Church, civil authority, Christ's return, and supplementary articles on free will, more on faith and works, and prayers to the saints.

Articles XXII through XXVIII address abuses: the Lord's Supper, marriage

of clergy, the Mass, confession, distinction of foods, monastic vows, and ecclesiastical power.

Significance of the Confession

The Augsburg Confession is a mild and conciliatory document. It avoids some of the touchy subjects. It is a powerful defense of the Gospel. Roman Catholic opponents were well aware that it struck at the heart of their system. Although the Emperor rejected it, many were impressed with it and it was translated into French and Italian at the initiative of the Emperor.

The Confession describes in detail what was being taught in the reformation churches of Germany. It sets forth the fundamental teachings of the Gospel and shows clearly that these teachings are supported by Scripture and are the historic positions of the Christian Church. From the time it was written, it has been a standard that teachers in the Lutheran Church have been charged to uphold. It was collected into the Formula of Concord in 1580.

We Adhere To Luther's Small Catechism

History of the Catechism

Martin Luther, as a parish pastor, felt the need to preach sermons on the basic issues of the Bible, such as the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. He not only prepared material for teaching in the home, but also provided catechetical sermons for the clergy. In 1525 he asked Justus Jonas and J. Agricola to prepare a catechism for children. By 1528 he was so shocked at the massive ignorance and indifference of village clergy and laity that he decided to do it himself rather than wait for Jonas and Agricola to get it done.

Luther designed the Small Catechism to be used in the home by the head of the patriarchal household in that feudal society. This was Luther's method: First, the instructor would read the content and the learners would memorize and repeat it. Second, there was an explanation that applied the memorized truths to daily life. Third, Luther's model sermons showed pastors how to teach these truths from the pulpit.

Contents of the Catechism

The Small Catechism explains the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. It was included in the Book of Concord “because laymen needed to know the difference between true and false doctrine” and because the catechisms “formulate Christian doctrine on the basis of God's Word for ordinary laymen in a most correct and simple, yet sufficiently explicit, form” (Bodensieck, 1965, p. 378).

Study Questions

- 1) Some constitutions have only two paragraphs in their statement of faith. The first is this: We believe the Bible is the final authority for faith and practice. The second is this: We believe the Lutheran Confessions are a summary of biblical teachings. What are the strengths and weaknesses of that approach?
- 2) If our Statement of Faith says that we accept these confessions, how familiar should church leaders be with these documents? What benefits would there be in becoming familiar with them?
- 3) The Small Catechism is the basis for confirmation instruction. How familiar should church leaders be with that document? What benefits would there be in becoming familiar with it?
- 4) Should confirmation instruction be given in the church or in the home, as Luther originally intended? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

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