

Sharing Life, Sharing Faith

Discussion #3

I. Bible Study - The Means of Grace (The Word and Sacraments)

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one in whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? **(Romans 10:14)**

According to Scripture, a twofold power inheres in these means: first, an exhibiting and conferring, or imparting, power, and secondly, as a result of this, an efficacious or operative, power. The conferring, or imparting power consists in this, that these means offer men the forgiveness of sins, supplied through Christ's work of reconciliation. The efficacious, or operative power of the means of grace consist in this, that through them the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith, faith in the very forgiveness, God's love and grace, which these means declare and reveal.¹

According to Scripture, all means of grace have the same purpose and the same effect, namely, the conferring of the forgiveness of sins and the resultant engendering and strengthening of faith. We are not to imagine that each one of the three means transmits one third of the forgiveness.²

Also the objection that there is no need of offering and confirming to Christians one and the same forgiveness of sins in several ways betrays an astonishing ignorance. Both Scripture and experience teach that men who feel the weight of their sins find nothing harder to believe than the forgiveness of their sins. Hence, repetition of the assurance of the forgiveness of sins in various ways through the means of grace meets a practical need of Christians.³ **(Francis Pieper)**

A. The Word of God is a Means of Grace

1. The Word grants knowledge of the truth of salvation

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. **(Isaiah 55:10-11)**

These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. **(John 20:31)**

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. **(I John 1:3-4)**

2. The word brings God's grace when it is preached

And he said to them, "Go out into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be condemned. **(Mark 16:15-16)**

3. **The word brings God's grace when absolution is given**

If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. **(John 20:23)**

If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven -- if there was anything to forgive -- I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake. **(II Corinthians 2:10)**

B. **Baptism is also a Means of Grace**

1. **Baptism brings with it the forgiveness of sins**

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." **(Acts 2:38)**

And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also - not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. **(I Peter 3:21)**

Baptism is God's act of forgiveness and faith-giving. Baptism conveys the full forgiveness of all sins; past, present and future. The individual being baptized may or may not understand what is happening because it is God who is doing the forgiving and the saving. Baptism is the moment when Christians may say they became a Christian unless they came to faith by means of the Word prior to their baptism. Baptism into Christ is also baptism into His Church. **(Rev. Richard A. Bolland)**

2. **Martin Luther's Large Catechism has this to say about Baptism**

To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act. From this fact everyone can easily conclude that it is of much greater value than the work of any human being or saint. For what human work can possibly be greater than God's work? ⁴ **(IV:10)**

Note the distinction, then: Baptism is a very different thing from all other water, not by virtue of the natural substance but because here something nobler is added, for God himself stakes his honor, his power, and his might on it. Therefore it is not simply a natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water - praise it in any other terms you can -- all by virtue of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word that no one can sufficiently extol, for it contains and conveys all that is God's. ⁵ **(IV:17)**

No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire. ⁶ **(IV: 46)**

C. The Lord's Supper is a Means of Grace

1. The Words of Institution

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks 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."
(Matthew 26:26-28)

2. Martin Luther's Large Catechism

Now, what is the Sacrament of the Altar? Answer: It is the true body and blood our the Lord Christ, in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ's word to eat and drink. And just as we said of baptism that it is not mere water, so we say here, too, that the sacrament is bread and wine, but not mere bread and wine such as is served at the table. Rather, it is bread and wine set within God's Word and bound to it.⁷ (V:8-9)

3. The Importance of the Blood Covenant

Both the old בְּרִית, or covenant, and the testament of Christ's fulfillment were connected with blood. The former could be sealed with the blood of animal sacrifice: Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words, (Exod. 24:48). This blood typified and promised the blood of Christ, God's own Son, to seal "the new testament" by which we inherit all that this blood has purchased and won for us. The old covenant could be written in animal blood because it consisted of a promise; the new testament could be written only in the blood of the Son of God because it conveys the complete fulfillment of the promise, the actual purchase of our redemption.⁸
(Robert Lenski)

That the Lord's Supper conveys the forgiveness of sins does not, in anyway, take anything away from the fact that by "faith alone" in Christ we are saved. It is precisely by faith alone in Christ's atonement that the benefits of the forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper may be obtained. The "New Covenant" of the Lord's Supper is, exactly, the forgiveness of sins. This is why the apostolic writers go to great pains to expressly describe the Lord's Supper.
(Rev. Richard A, Bolland)

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? (I Corinthians 10:6)

D. Discussion Questions

In a recent sermon, Pastor Bolland said, "...in times of trial and stress we find ourselves experiencing anything but peace. But that is not necessarily the same kind of peace of which this text speaks. (Luke 2:25-40) I would suggest that perhaps we start where Simeon started. And that is, if we wish to be peaceful people passing through this life, for whatever amount of time that we have, that we need to be someone who is steeped strongly in God's Word."

What does it mean to be "steeped in God's Word"?

Where is the best place to achieve this?

What did the people of Simeon's day do?

Hint: These questions were also answered in the same sermon!

II. Overview of Cults ⁹

A. Brief Survey of Cults

The cult often begins as a fringe group to an accepted religion. Then, under the influence of a strong central figure, it moves away from its original roots and takes on a life of its own.

Cultic language springs from the orthodox language of its parenting body. That is one reason they confuse Christians so easily. Cults use language recognizable, at least in part, by people rooted in major religious systems. And those doing the twisting can sound so persuasive! They are very knowledgeable, both about the orthodox understandings against which they speak and the new way they have of presenting those understandings.

We must avoid overgeneralization, yet some marks of the cult are common enough that a "mentality of the cults" can be identified.

- 1) **Doctrine of the last days and last things** is a frequent theme among cults. Signs and warnings of how rapidly the world is falling into judgment take on a flavor and intention all their own in the cults.
- 2) **Prophecy and fulfillment themes** reveal the mentality of the cults. The use of scripture to do this is highly selective and very manipulative.
- 3) **Special revelations** are frequently the basis for "correct" interpretation of a particular prophecy and its fulfillment. This, of course, makes dialog with such groups extremely difficult.
- 4) **The authority of the cult leader is regularly exercised** in the interpretation of the "inner secrets". Revelations, secret rituals, and symbols require authoritarian interpretation. Only those "on the inside" can have this authority. This sense of secretiveness also gives rise to castes or inner structures of authority to preserve and pass on this "inside knowledge". The Mormon Church exemplifies such authoritarian practice.

- 5) **Most cults are very dogmatic.** They are therefore highly intolerant of deviations from their teachings.
- 6) **A form of double-talk also characterizes cults.** By this, we means that they use ordinary terms in special ways that only the cult members understand. What must be kept in mind is this: What a word means to you is by no means what the same word may mean to a cult member. This makes dialog with cult members difficult.
- 7) **A complete lack of interest in logical consistency** accompanies this double-talk. The mental flip-flops that members of cults make bewilder the ordinary hearer.
- 8) **Cults are convinced that their "way" will be proved in the end.**
- 9) **The concept of sin is frequently minimized or totally absent** in the language of the cults. When spoken of, "sin" is equated with resisting or living outside the boundaries of their teachings and/or life-styles. Inside their ranks, though, the "right way" is clearly taught and lived. Therefore, sin is not commonly spoken of in their midst since they know and live "the right way". Minimizing the concept of sin affects what the cults mean when using works like salvation. "To be saved" has little to do with a right relationship with God; it means membership and participation in the cult itself.
- 10) **Cults also insist on a highly disciplined framework of thought and life.** Nonmembers commonly feel quite challenged -often intimidated or shamed - by the intense discipline and commitment of cult members.
- 11) **This leads to a highly compartmentalized life.** In many cases, members have little or no serious contact with reality and the outside world.
- 12) **Cult members feel "freed" from "religious exploitation".** Here one sees what a mind-job is done by cultic leaders. They impress upon followers that liberation from all outside religious oppression takes place only within the cult.

Rarely, if ever, would all of the above be found in one cult, but many of them will appear quite consistently. When encountering several of them at once, one can almost certainly identify the group as a cult.

A final caution: Because cults usually include at least one unusual but visible teaching, people on the outside often think of that one item as the main difference between the cult and its parent group. However, that item often is a nonessential or relatively minor matter.

Discussion question: What are some of these unusual visible teachings in the cults we are familiar with?

B. What attracts people to cults

- 1) A disenchantment with intellect.
- 2) The mood of "relativity".
- 3) The need for human community.
- 4) The rise in leisure time
- 5) Shallow religious understandings
- 6) The meaning of life
- 7) The need for personal involvement

C. What keeps people in cults

The appeal of the cults is explained by the very fact that cult members by and large are quite satisfied that their needs are being met by these groups. For the most part, those who join cults feel that they have found a secure place in life. They sense a meaning to which they can attach themselves. **They are content.** It is important to note this, because sometimes we are tempted to insinuate that a member of a cult is not really "*happy*". To approach cult members thus is counterproductive.

D. Difficulties in Sharing Faith with Cult Members

In order to respond, one must have a decent knowledge of a cult's history, beginning with its founder and continuing through stages (of growth) until it has arrived at its present state.

The developed rigidity of belief and life pattern is what makes dialog so difficult. This very rigidity is vital to the existence of cults. **Any crack in their belief system is enough to cause the whole structure to come tumbling down.** Therefore, there is no room for doubt or question. People in a cult sense this intuitively, even though they may never have consciously thought it out.

The significant characteristics of the Christian church are a correct use of Scripture, along with a proper administration of sacraments. Christians accept Holy Scriptures as the only authority for what the church believes and teaches. The problem is, many cults are in full agreement with that - **which puts Christians at a loss for words.** If both agree on the authority of Scripture, how can they each defend a truth that opposes the other? Or is the cult only a denomination, with the primary problem being one of interpretation? No -- and the reason why becomes obvious after searching only a bit further. Most cults operate with a "key" to interpretation, a basic writing that is the authority for understanding the Bible. So, for example, in Christian Science, in Mormonism, and among Jehovah's Witnesses, Scripture does not stand on its own. **Their key to interpretation supersedes the Scripture.**

Another dimension of this has to do with the way the Bible is used. The Scripture is authoritative in terms of its total message of God's revelation. When a cult member comes with a large number of "proof texts", it confuses a Christian who has not been instructed this way. The cult member seems to know the Bible far better than the Christian. Rarely does the hearer have even a small number of passages at his/her disposal to respond to this huge array of proof texts thrown out helter-skelter to convince the hearer of the biblical foundations of the cult.

Most cults attach little importance to what we call the sacraments. These groups may develop some rituals that have a sacramental meaning of some sort to them, but rarely are the biblical sacraments at the heart of their life together. Here one can usually make very clear distinctions, for Baptism and Holy Communion are typically at the heart of life in the Christian church, while they are at best marginal in most cults.

E. Do's and Don'ts of Witnessing to Cult Members

- 1) **Don't** be hostile.
 - 2) **Don't** slam the door in their face. (Can you make an appointment with them for later when you can be more prepared?)
 - 3) **Don't** argue heatedly.
 - 4) **Don't** show anxiety
 - 5) **Don't** rely on yourself alone. Pray for guidance, and ask a friend to be present with you. Remember that lack of success is not a sign of an absence of the Spirit.
- 1) **Do** be patient.
 - 2) **Do** be loving.

F. Final Thoughts

Christian "gentleness and respect" requires also that we be genuinely and warmly concerned for cult members. Cult members are sinful human beings in need of Christ just as we are. Our Christian concern has to do with their total welfare. **As a good rule of thumb, treat them as you would want them to treat you.** They are people with needs common to all other humans. They too are people for whom Jesus died.

III. Exercise - Group response to the following scenarios:

A. Scenario #1

Two young ladies are knocking at your door. When you answer, one of them tells you that she has some great news to share with you. They don't say what group they are representing, but you think they are Jehovah's Witnesses. You respond by saying that you are a Christian and believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross to save us from our sins. One of them responds, "Well, we believe exactly the same thing!" What do you say next? Continue the discussion.

B. Scenario #2

You are taking a break at work. One of your co-workers is a Mormon. He tells you that he is going to Utah this weekend to go to "The Temple". You ask what that means, and he tells you that that is a place where they go to do sacred ordinances. What do you ask next? Continue the discussion.

IV. Journal Sharing

Could any of these people benefit by a visit or informal meeting/coffee etc. with other members of the group, elders, etc.?

V. Next Month

A. Bible Study - Distinguishing Law and Gospel

B. Overview of Jehovah's Witnesses

C. Scenarios

D. Journal Sharing

E. Outside Reading

Jehovah's Witness - Interview with David and Peni Reid

CFW Walther's 25 Theses on Law and Gospel

¹ Pieper, Francis, "Christian Dogmatics", © 1950, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, Volume III, pg 103

² Ibid, pg 108

³ Ibid, pg 114

⁴ Book of Concord, Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert © 2000, Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, Martin Luther's Large Catechism, Section IV:10, pg 457

⁵ Ibid, Section IV:17, pg 458

⁶ Ibid, Section IV:46, pg 462

⁷ Ibid, Section V:8-9, pg 467

⁸ Lenski, R. Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, MN, "Commentary on Matthew", pg 1030

⁹ Beck, Huber F., "How to Respond: The Cults" © 1995, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO