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Bringing Christ to the Neighbor Introduction- Session 01

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Bringing Christ to the Neighbor

A WITNESS WORKSHOP
BY DR. ROBERT KOLB



Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Personal Witness Inventory	5
Session 1	4
Session 2	6
Session 3	8
Session 4	10
Session 5	14
Session 6	16
Session 7	18
Session 8	22
Session 9	24
Session 10 & Elective Session 11	26
Case Studies	28



Bringing Christ to the Neighbor

In 2014 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod New Jersey District invited the Institute for Mission Studies at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis to conduct a model workshop on the witness of Christians to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the course of their daily lives. Out of that experience has grown a series of videos to aid congregations in cultivating attitudes and aptitudes for speaking of the life-restoring and life-enriching message of death and resurrection of Jesus Christ with casual acquaintances and longtime friends, with family members and fellow workers, with neighbors and those who share hobbies and leisure time with us.

The fundamental form and much of the substance of this presentation stems from my work with my colleague at the Oswald Hoffmann Institute for Christian Outreach at Concordia University, St. Paul, Minn., Dr. Stephen Stohlmann. Together we developed a workshop intended to bring the insights of Martin Luther into the nature of the dynamic Word of God, as it confronts and invites those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The video discussions provided for this workshop can be found at https://scholar.csl.edu/christ_to_neighbor/. They took place in a graduate seminar at Concordia Seminary in January 2017, with four students from the United States, one from South Africa and one from Brazil. Together we replicated the discussions that I had had with the pastors in New Jersey and that I have had with fellow Christians in many places over the years. This booklet offers thoughts on how discussions sparked by the videos might be structured, as a kind of leader's manual, although in each congregation different experiences and varying dynamics will make the use of the videos unique.

THE PURPOSE AND GOAL OF THIS WORKSHOP

There are many reasons why those whose lives have been made whole by the message of new life in Christ are reluctant to share the center of their way of thinking and living with even the closest of their friends, to say nothing about casual contacts. Underlying this reluctance often lies, I suspect, simply the lack of practice. "I have just never done that before," we say to ourselves — and perhaps to other Christians — as we explain our hesitation and foot-dragging in talking with others about our faith in Jesus Christ.

This workshop is designed to help believers practice expressing their faith in a safe environment, with other Christians, who are just as reluctant to put into spoken words what I believe in my heart, what guides my daily living and gives me joy in the morning and peace in the evening. Through the use of case studies that can become texts for role-playing, we can begin to think ourselves into the world of those whom the Lord sends near enough for us to touch with our conversation. Such case-study discussions among Christians, and especially taking the roles and acting out the person of either the witness or the one outside the faith, can loosen up our witnessing muscles and get them in shape.

PROCEDURE

This program offers 10 or 11 sessions that may be structured for one-hour encounters in a Sunday morning Bible class setting or in an evening discussion series over 10 or 11 weeks. These sessions also may be grouped for a workshop conducted on a Friday evening and Saturday, or a Saturday and Sunday afternoon. The program may be used by a single congregation or a group of congregations

in an area. Every congregation and every Christian lives in his or her own environment, so it is best to devise case studies on scene, in your own setting, with the concerns of the people you know. Therefore, sample case studies offered in this booklet and the two discussed in the video are best used as models for thinking through and composing your own case studies where you are, where the Lord is sending people into your reach.

As a way to follow-up on the initial use of these materials, congregations could conduct occasional meetings to work out case studies with role-playing and/or to share challenges in personal witnessing and to encourage one another in the midst of witnessing opportunities.

This booklet provides a few thoughts on each session and suggestions for what the leader of the workshop might aim to accomplish in each session. Each session should begin and end with prayer since our prayers are an absolutely necessary part of the life of every witness to the Gospel of Christ. Each session should be governed by the needs of the participants to discuss their own opportunities and challenges in bringing Christ to their neighbors.

The booklet also offers a “Personal Witness Inventory” to enable participants in the workshop to think about the opportunities, gifts, skills, risks and benefits that play a role in their own testifying of Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It is suggested that this inventory be used in both the opening and closing sessions of the workshop. In addition, a chart of the “impacts of evil” on the lives of people and Gospel responses to those who are unsettled by them may be used for discussion.

This chart has been adapted from my *Speaking the Gospel Today, A Theology for Evangelism* (2. ed., Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), which leaders of the workshop may wish to obtain for a discussion of many aspects touched in the videos.

The One who sends us to baptize and teach in order to give His gift of new life through His death and resurrection has assured us that He holds all power in heaven and on earth and that He is with us to the end of the ages (Matt. 28:18-20). Since Jesus is going with us, we can venture into any corner of His world, and speak to anyone to whom He has brought us near, with His Gospel, which is God’s power for saving sinners as we speak it (Rom. 1:17). He invites us and accompanies us on the adventure of introducing Him to those whom He makes our “neighbors.”



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Session 1

Most parents eagerly look forward to their baby's first words, and soon thereafter most are pleased that the little girl or boy is "getting to be such a chatterbox" — even though the enthusiasm may eventually wear thin. We notice when our children adopt our phrases or imitate our speech patterns in other ways. God reveals Himself as a talker, from His creative words in Genesis 1 through the conversation of the Lord and His saints reported and predicted in Revelation. God wants His children to be chips off the old block in this regard and to share the family secrets so that we may bring others home to His supper table.

All Christians are witnesses of the faith that provides us with our ultimate sense of identity, security, meaning, place and respect. Sometimes our witness effectively points to Jesus Christ; certainly, for those who know that we claim to be Christian, we give some impression of what Jesus truly means to us all the time. For those who do not know that we are Christian, it becomes evident, sometimes more quickly, sometimes more slowly, what is most important and stands at the center of our lives. This workshop is aimed at cultivating witness within the circles of acquaintanceship that the participants already have, not some form of brief encounter (although it may help in such situations as well). In this first session, participants should discuss the basic characteristics of those who give effective witness to Christ.

The aim of Christian witness to Christ is always to introduce other people to the Savior, who restores the fullness of human life to those who have lost it through their own sinfulness and the sinfulness of others. We will talk about how to present Jesus. But it is also important to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" In the parable Jesus told in Luke 10:25-37, the neighbor — the person God "brought near" — was not even a casual acquaintance but rather a stranger. God has placed each one of us near many people. The openness of each of them to hear our alternative to the false systems of belief and the false gods that are holding their lives together varies from time to time. That is why being a good listener is so important.

To help participants listen for clues to the place to begin introducing Jesus to those who are near to us, the next sessions will discuss how human beings live within the framework of a worldview and bind their lives together in their search for identity, security, meaning, place and respect. In this first session it is best simply to think about those whom God has brought near to us — in our families, at our workplace, in our neighborhoods, in leisure activities and in other corners of our lives.

Evangelism programs may be helpful, and organized congregational outreach in various forms also serves the God-given task of every congregation to seek the lost and share the Gospel with those who do not know Christ as their Lord and Savior. But personal contacts and conversations have proven to be the most effective way to function as a tool of the Holy Spirit in bringing new members into the family of God. We may say, "I do not know enough to risk such conversations? What if the person has questions I cannot answer?" Witnessing to Jesus' love is not the same thing as teaching a Bible class or participating in a quiz show. It is not an examination testing our command of Christian doctrine. It is simply introducing one person to another, one friend to someone whom we have just met or have known for a long time. Most people outside the faith do not want to experience "Super-Christian." Our own personal vulnerability is our greatest strength in giving witness to the One who has saved us and restored the good life to us.

We may say, "I have no right to tell anyone else what they should believe." We constantly exercise the right to tell others about our favorite restaurants or the best computer or the greatest automobile. We are always sharing helpful news and refreshing insights. We certainly owe an account of the One who holds our lives together and daily enriches them to other people. We may notice that the other person is not interested. That does not stop us from talking in many instances, but it may truly be best to plant single seeds of thought instead of drowning them in a gush relating the goodness of God as we have experienced it.

Or we may think that our lives are not good enough, again something that is probably a strength for most witnessing situations. Those who are interested in finding a new source of peace and hope have holes in their own lives that need filling. They want and need to hear about the struggle that others have experienced in that regard. More serious is the excuse that we have no place to bring someone interested in finding out more about Christ. That is a serious problem in some congregations. That is one reason why witnessing is always a team and a tag-team effort. Pastors and people must take seriously the calling of the Holy Spirit to every congregation to serve as a haven for those seeking shelter in the storms of life. Pastors and people must work on making the congregation an inviting place to come after both pastors and people

have gone into the world to seek and to rescue the lost, befuddled, lonely and rebellious.

Among the most important characteristics of the believer in giving witness to faith in Christ is patience, along with prayer, placing one's own words and the heart and mind of the conversation partner in the hands of the Holy Spirit. Believers enter (or fall) into witnessing situations, conscious of the fact that the Spirit accompanies them. As they prepare to strengthen the ability to give witness to Jesus, they need to ask, "who am I?" as one whom Christ has rescued and restored to God's family. The questions that flow from that conviction should be discussed in the first session of this workshop. Leaders may copy the inventory of personal assessment for participants:

Personal Witness Inventory

1. What particular opportunities do I have for witnessing at work, home, in the neighborhood, etc.?

2. What is the nature of those opportunities — short-term or long-term, individual or tag-team, secure sinner or broken sinner?

3. What gifts has God given me to make it possible for me to do at least a part of the witnessing task in the face of these opportunities?

4. What skills do I need to sharpen to do such witnessing?

5. What risks do I face in doing such witnessing?

6. What benefits will I receive from doing such witnessing?

Session 2

The discussion will permit participants to share fears, hesitations, hopes and observations about the situations in which witnessing might sprout and blossom in their own lives. The exchange of experiences and perspectives will open eyes and imaginations to unthought of possibilities and opportunities that the Lord is placing within their circles of acquaintances.

The poor Jewish person who was beaten up on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem (Luke 10) was undoubtedly surprised to find out that a Samaritan was his neighbor, but probably no more surprised than was the Samaritan. He probably asked as he left the inn, “How did I get myself into this situation?” We know that the Holy Spirit gives us opportunities to witness among those we know very well and those whom we hardly know but have chanced, under the Spirit’s direction, to meet.

Listening to those whom we know well and those with whom we are hardly acquainted is the first step in being able to make Christ become a meaningful person to them. Patience, patience, patience must characterize the good witness, along with a lot of listening. We listen for what the missionary anthropologist Paul Hiebert calls a “worldview” (*Transforming Worldviews, an Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, 2008). Beneath — at the base of — opinions, convictions, principles and perspectives on life lies a fundamental assessment of what the world is and is about. Scripture sets forth a worldview within the context of the thinking of ancient Israel and the Hellenistic culture of the Mediterranean world at the time of Christ and Paul. Underlying the expressions of the prophets and apostles are the fundamental axioms that God is Creator and that human beings are His creatures, along with the description of the human creature as one whose life proceeds from, as Martin Luther summarized it, “fearing, loving and trusting in God above all things.”

Different contexts, even within North America, shape the people around us in different ways. But a pervasive

definition of the good life has emerged, strikingly different from the village or tribal worldview of our ancestors, and no longer the worldview of our youth 25 or 30 years ago. Individuals in North American culture at the beginning of the 21st century immerse themselves and are immersed by media, family, friends, teachers and more media in a worldview that is ever-changing and developing. The predominant worldview of most North Americans values material blessings of life as of utmost, if not ultimate, importance, and that is fiercely individualistic, defining the successful and satisfied person in terms of accumulation of “my” possessions and being “free” to “do it my way.” (To “satisfy” comes from two Latin words meaning “make enough” or to “fill to the fullest,” as in “fulfill,” while the German word we translate for “satisfy” really means “being at peace.”) However tempered circumstances, experiences and upbringing may have made these two elements of the U.S. citizen’s creed, we all are caught by elements of this deceptive trap. Therefore, as we listen to others, we have to realize that, after we have conducted a conversation about the Creator and the Re-Creator within that framework, we will have to move on, at some future point, to the deconstruction of false beliefs, a false worldview, that accentuates and exalts materialistic and individualistic principles.

As North Americans piece together their operational views of the world, they mix and match. The technical term for that in theology is “syncretism,” and it has always been a plague with which Christians have had to contend. Patchwork religion is nothing new, but it is the way most people try to construct a situation for coping with life. We all tend to fit together elements, some of which do not really fit together, to make some satisfactory explanation of our experiences and to justify doing what we want to do.

Martin Luther saw that trust is fundamental to human personhood and personality. In that regard, the 20th century German-American psychologist-philosopher Erik Erikson agreed, arguing that the degree to which a child learns to trust or mistrust his or her

environment will shape the individual's personality through later stages of development. Discussing the trust we place in the builders of the building under the roof of which we sit, quite comfortably, or the designers of the bridges which we cross daily, will help lay a foundation for discussing our trust in one or more persons or things that give us a sense of what is absolute and ultimate in our lives. Even if we think that nothing is absolute or ultimate in this changing world, we do regard something as able to give us sufficient answers to what vexes us at any given moment. Something, we decide, will at least get us through the night and give us at least semi-solid footing tomorrow.

As they mix and match to construct objects of their ultimate trust, contemporary North Americans are searching for five things: a sense of place, respect, identity, security and meaning or worth. Fundamentally, they need to know who they are; they have some image of themselves and are constantly appraising that image. The modern concept of identity is somewhat akin to Luther's concept of righteousness: It describes what makes a person righteous in relationship to others and particularly in relationship to whatever he or she regards as ultimate and absolute, whether forever or for the next 24 hours.

Erikson also used identity as a key concept and fostered a sense of the search for personal identity in the North American consciousness. In addition to identity, human beings need some sense of security, of safety, in what often seems like a broken world that renders them vulnerable and at risk. A part of our sense of safety is having a place to call home, a place where everybody

knows our name, a place where we can go when no one else will take us in. In addition, we need to have some sense of the meaning of our lives and of our own worth. Parallel to our life's significance or meaning in our own minds is the respect of others.

What supplies us with this prism for life — our sense of place, respect, identity, security and meaning — is our ultimate and absolute. Because no single substitute can really compensate for the absence of our Creator, we are all polytheists by sinful nature. No single god suffices in place of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is the only prism that properly refracts the light that He shines into our lives and makes it come to full and truly natural color.

TALKING POINTS

Discussion in Session 2 may revolve around how the participants know to construct their worldviews and tentatively explore how they trust someone or something to anchor life, at least for a time. The issue of trust leads into Session 3.



Session 3

How do other people conceive of “god” — or whatever is absolute and ultimate in their lives, or, short of that, what will get them through the night and help them with tomorrow? I grew up in a world in which seemingly everyone believed in “God” and, if anything, just needed to find out that He has revealed Himself as the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. But that is, of course, not true in our world, certainly less true than it was a half century ago. But all other worldviews stand in contrast to the biblical worldview and thus to Martin Luther’s definition of the term “god” as that in which we put our trust — and finally that it is not the many objects of our immediate trust of roofs and bridges but rather that in which we put our ultimate trust. That definition helps us think through what kinds of substitutes for the true God people invent in our patchwork religious environment.

Our alienation from God has, in Luther’s words, “turned us in on ourselves.” What Christ has done for us by hiding our sin in His tomb (Rom. 6:1-7, Col. 2:11-15) is to liberate us from this turned-in condition and thus to free us to praise God and truly serve our neighbor. His liberation ends our attempts to manipulate God by doing religious activities, and it unshackles us to serve our neighbor’s needs instead of exploit our neighbors by using them as the objects of activities that we think will please God or fulfill our own needs.

There are varieties of idolatry. J.C.A. Gaskins surveyed “varieties of unbelief” in the religious and philosophical systems of Western cultures. Gaskins describes and addresses forms that can be classified as atheism, Deism, materialism, skepticism, naturalism and other organizing principles (*Varieties of Unbelief from Epicurus to Sartre*, 1989). Such classifications may help some in giving us orientation, but in a mix-and-match religious environment, we dare never forget that all such categorization does not set aside the need for listening to the particular religious patchwork of our current conversation partner(s).

A somewhat oversimplified cataloging of the kinds of substitutes for God that people invent lists four kinds of false gods. The first substitutes some form of human being or group of human beings for God as that which bestows identity and provides security. It may be a political party, a social class or the myth of some race that is pure. It may even be the individual himself or herself, though that is a very tender reed on which to place the weight of life. A second type of ultimate and absolute is polytheistic, often with at least semi-personal beings, but sometimes with a variety of principles, that provide specific help in specific spheres of life. Third, ancient Gnostics and modern naturalists posit an ultimate non-personal spirit of one kind or another, a principle, which radiates



reality through the experienced universe and human history. Finally, those “religions,” which have a single, personal, communicating ultimate and absolute, are all derived from biblical revelation: Christianity and its two major heresies, modern Judaism and Islam. Each of these types of presenting what is absolute and ultimate seek to provide their adherents with a sense of place, respect, identity, security and meaning.

The word “religion” — in Latin, “*religio*” — may come from a root meaning “to stand in awe of” something or from another word that designates what binds life together. Both shed light on the function of both what God has given us as the truly human way of life and the substitutes for it in other religious systems or explanations for the good life. A scholar of comparative religions, Ninian Smart, has proposed that all “religions” have six elements, which I translate as:

1. Doctrine — the fundamental principles that describe the realities of the ultimate and absolute and human life
2. Narrative — the stories that often substitute for doctrine as explanations of various aspects of human experience
3. Ritual — the human actions that relate to the divine directly in sacred or religious activities
4. Ethics or morality — the human actions that are right and proper for interaction with other human

beings and the world surrounding us

5. Community — including how those adherents of the religion relate to each other and how they organize themselves under human leadership
6. An element that binds these five factors together: faith in God for Christians, submission to Allah for Muslims, the search for Nirvana for Buddhists (*Worldviews: Cross-Cultural Exploration of Human Beliefs*, 1983)

Some people have been given or have constructed for themselves a version of their religious system that emphasizes doctrine and gives it control over the entire system. For others, ritual or ethics or a hierarchy may occupy that central and governing spot in the system. Listening carefully will help us understand where the axis of our conversation partner’s understanding of reality and human life lies. Smart’s pattern can stimulate our thinking about what we are to be listening for in conversations with those outside the faith and about how we instruct them in what it means to be a Christian and trust in Christ.

TALKING POINTS

Discussion in this session can continue the exchange about the nature, concerns and perceptions of life held by those with whom we come into conversation in daily life.



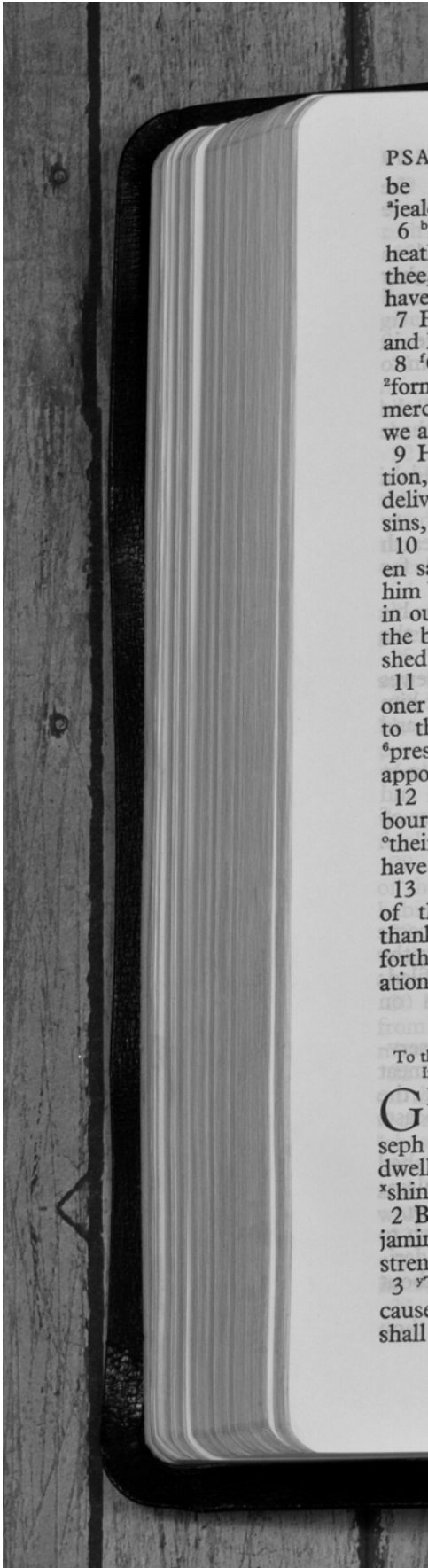
Session 4

Martin Luther regarded God as a talker. He found that God was speaking before He became visible; out of the darkness of Genesis 1 He said, "Let there be," and all reality sprang from His Word. Luther did not believe that human speech only provides information and points to a heavenly reality when it talks about God and His feelings toward His human creatures. He believed that God's Word is, to use the terminology of recent linguistic theorists, "performative." Even more than "performative," God's Word is creative and re-creative. God addresses His human creatures who have turned their back on Him, defy Him and doubt His Word as He addresses it to them. He is displeased, sore displeased, for He is jealous of any substitute to Himself which they might have found or invented and prefer to Him for providing their sense of ultimate place, respect, identity, security and meaning.

But much more than expressing His condemnation of their straying from Him, God's Word also expresses and enacts His love for them. His Word of Gospel in Jesus Christ re-creates them. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians (2:1-10), those who were dead as far as God was concerned — because God was dead for them as far as they were concerned — have been made alive, resurrected with Christ and given the inheritance of eternal life. The result of that is that those whose sins are buried in Christ's tomb are raised to live a new life (Rom. 6:4), walking in Christ's footsteps. Those who have been buried with Christ are raised with Him to set their hearts on things above; with lives hidden in Christ they put to death immorality, evil desires and greed, along with all else that deviates from God's pattern for good human living (Col. 2:11-12, 3:1-5).

God's Word, as He gave it to the prophets and apostles, arises from the biblical page to address those who have strayed from their true humanity and missed God's mark for the good human life. Its address kills and makes alive, as will be discussed in Session 6. God's telling sinners that they are dead in sin seals their graves. God's telling these same people that they are forgiven and have been given life and salvation actually bestows new life upon them. Much more than merely a clean slate, they have the living and active identity of child of God, and they are empowered through the Gospel to live it to the fullest.

Luther recognized that Scripture presents God as the author of history. God invented and manages the passage of time. As the Lord of the moments of historical change, as a Creator who has embedded Himself in the creation through His own incarnation, He also engages His chosen people through His Word. He is the Lord of each and every culture and has gifted different peoples, societies and cultures with their own mix



angry for ever? shall thy
ousy burn like fire?
Pour out thy wrath upon the
hen that have 'not known
, and upon the kingdoms that
'not called upon thy name.

For they have devoured Jacob,
laid waste his dwelling place.
O remember not against us
our iniquities: let thy tender
cies speedily prevent us: for
re brought very low.

Help us, O God of our salva-
for the glory of thy name: and
er us, and purge away our
'for thy name's sake.

Wherefore should the heath-
ay, Where is their God? let
be known among the heathen
ar sight by the 'revenging of
blood of thy servants which is

Let 'the sighing of the pris-
come before thee; according
ne greatness of 'thy power
erve thou those that are
inted to die;

And render unto our neigh-
'sevenfold into their bosom
reproach, wherewith they
reproached thee, O Lord.

So 'we thy people and sheep
thy pasture will give thee
ks for ever: 'we will shew
thy praise 'to all gener-

PSALM 80

the chief Musician *upon Shō-shānn'-
m-Ē'-dūth, A Psalm 'of Ā'-sāph.

IVE ear, O Shepherd of
Israel, thou that ledest Jo-
'like a flock; thou that
lest between the chēr'-ū-bims,
e forth.

efore Ē'-phrā-īm and Ben-
n and Mā-nās'-sēh stir up thy
gth, and 'come and save us.

Turn us again, O God, 'and
e thy face to shine; and we
be saved.

a Zeph. 3.8
1 Heb. with
thou smoke
b Jer. 10.25
Rev. 16.1
Is. 45.4,5
c 2 Thes. 1.8
d Ps. 42.3
Is. 30.20
e Ps. 53.4

f Is. 64.9
2 Or, the in-
iquities of
them that
were before
us

g Is. 51.7
Jer. 2.21
Ezek. 15.6
h Ps. 44.2

i Jer. 14.7
k Ps. 42.10

3 Heb. venge-
ance
4 Heb. the
cedars of God

l Ps. 102.20

5 Heb. thine
arm

6 Heb. rescue
the children
of death

m Is. 5.5
Nah. 2.2

n Gen. 4.15
Is. 65.6,7
Jer. 32.18
Luke 6.38

o Ps. 74.18

p Ps. 74.1
& 95.7

q Is. 43.21
r Is. 63.15

7 Heb. to gen-
eration and
generation

* Ps. 45 & 69,
title

8 Or, for
Asaph

s Ps. 39.11
& 76.7
t Ps. 77.20

u Ps. 89.21

x Deut. 33.2
Ps. 50.2

9 Heb. come
for salvation
to us

y Lam. 5.21
z Num. 6.25
Ps. 4.6

God's renewed favour sought

4 O LORD God of hosts, how
long 'wilt thou be angry against
the prayer of thy people?

5 'Thou feedest them with the
bread of tears; and givest them
tears to drink in great measure.

6 Thou makest us a strife unto
our neighbours: and our enemies
laugh among themselves.

7 Turn us again, O God of hosts,
and cause thy face to shine; and
we shall be saved.

8 Thou hast brought 'a vine out
of Egypt: 'thou hast cast out the
heathen, and planted it.

9 Thou preparedst room before
it, and didst cause it to take deep
root, and it filled the land.

10 The hills were covered with
the shadow of it, and the boughs
thereof were like 'the goodly
cedars.

11 She sent out her boughs unto
the sea, and her branches unto the
river.

12 Why hast thou then 'broken
down her hedges, so that all they
which pass by the way do pluck
her?

13 The boar out of the wood
doth waste it, and the wild beast
of the field doth devour it.

14 Return, we beseech thee, O
God of hosts: 'look down from
heaven, and behold, and visit this
vine;

15 And the vineyard which thy
right hand hath planted, and the
branch that thou madest strong for
thyself.

16 It is burned with fire, it is cut
down: 'they perish at the rebuke
of thy countenance.

17 'Let thy hand be upon the
man of thy right hand, upon the
son of man whom thou madest
strong for thyself.

18 So will not we go back from
thee: quicken us, and we will call
upon thy name.

19 Turn us again, O LORD God

* Ps. 45 & 69,
title
8 Or, for
Asaph
s Ps. 39.11
& 76.7
t Ps. 77.20
u Ps. 89.21
x Deut. 33.2
Ps. 50.2
9 Heb. come
for salvation
to us
y Lam. 5.21
z Num. 6.25
Ps. 4.6

God: Saviour and Judge
of hosts, cause thy face to shine;
and we shall be saved.

PSALM 81

To the chief Musician *upon Gīt'-tith,
A Psalm 'of Ā'-sāph.

SING aloud unto God our
strength: make a joyful noise
unto the God of Jacob.

2 Take a psalm, and bring hither
the timbrel, the pleasant harp
with the psaltery.

3 Blow up the trumpet in the
new moon, in the time appointed,
on our solemn feast day.

4 For this was a statute for
Israel, and a law of the God of
Jacob.

5 This he ordained in Joseph
for a testimony, when he went out
through the land of Egypt: 'where
I heard a language that I under-
stood not.

6 I removed his shoulder from
the burden: his hands 'were de-
livered from the pots.

7 'Thou calledst in trouble, and
I delivered thee; 'I answered thee
in the secret place of thunder: I
proved thee at the waters of
'Mēr'-i-bāh. Sē'-lāh.

8 'Hear, O my people, and I will
testify unto thee: O Israel, if thou
wilt hearken unto me;

9 There shall no 'strange god be
in thee; neither shalt thou worship
any strange god.

10 'I am the LORD thy God,
which brought thee out of the
land of Egypt: 'open thy mouth
wide, and I will fill it.

11 But my people would not
hearken to my voice; and Israel
would 'none of me.

12 'So I gave them up 'unto
their own hearts' lust: and they
walked in their own counsels.

13 'Oh that my people had
hearkened unto me, and Israel had
walked in my ways!

14 I should soon have subdued

a Rom. 1.30
1 Or, yielded
feigned obed-
ience
Ps. 18.44
2 Heb. lied
Ps. 8, title
3 Or, for
Asaph
b Deut. 32.14
4 Heb. with
the fat of
wheat
c Job 29.6

5 Or, for
Asaph
d 2 Chr. 19.6

e ver. 6

f Deut. 1.17

6 Heb. Judge
7 Or, against
Ps. 114.1
h Jer. 22.3

i Job 29.12
Prov. 24.11

8 Heb. passed
away
k Mic. 3.1

l Ex. 2.23
Ps. 50.15

m Ex. 19.19
n Ps. 11.3

9 Heb. moved
o Ex. 17.6,7
p Ex. 22.28
John 10.34

1 Or, Strife
q Ps. 50.7

r Ps. 49.12

s Deut. 32.12
Is. 43.12

t Mic. 7.2,7
u Ps. 2.8
Rev. 11.15

x Ex. 20.2

2 Or, for
Asaph
y Ps. 103.5
z Ps. 28.1

a Ps. 2.1

b Ex. 32.1
Deut. 32.15

c Ps. 81.15
d Acts 7.42

3 Or, to the
hardness of
their hearts,
or, imagina-
tions
e Deut. 5.29
& 32.29
Is. 48.18

f Ps. 27.5
g Jer. 11.19

their enemies, and turned my
hand against their adversaries.

15 'The haters of the LORD
should have 'submitted them-
selves unto him: but their time
should have endured for ever.

16 He should 'have fed them
also 'with the finest of the wheat:
and with honey 'out of the rock
should I have satisfied thee.

PSALM 82

A Psalm 'of Ā'-sāph.

GOD 'standeth in the congre-
gation of the mighty; he
judgeth among 'the gods.

2 How long will ye judge un-
justly, and 'accept the persons of
the wicked? Sē'-lāh.

3 'Defend the poor and father-
less: 'do justice to the afflicted and
needy.

4 'Deliver the poor and needy:
rid them out of the hand of the
wicked.

5 They 'know not, neither will
they understand; they walk on in
darkness: 'all the foundations of
the earth are 'out of course.

6 'I have said, Ye are gods; and
all of you are children of the most
High.

7 But 'ye shall die like men, and
fall like one of the princes.

8 'Arise, O God, judge the earth:
'for thou shalt inherit all nations.

PSALM 83

A Song or Psalm 'of Ā'-sāph.

KEEP 'not thou silence, O
God: hold not thy peace,
and be not still, O God.

2 For, lo, 'thine enemies make a
tumult: and they that 'hate thee
have lifted up the head.

3 They have taken crafty counsel
against thy people, and consulted
'against thy hidden ones.

4 They have said, Come, and
'let us cut them off from being a
nation; that the name of Israel

of gifts. The experience at the Tower of Babel may have broken communication among human beings and between human beings and God, but God breaks through these cultural barriers and makes Himself at home in each of them by conversing with the natives in their native tongues.

Lamin Sanneh is a Gambian-born convert from Islam to the Christian faith and a professor of missiology at Yale Divinity School. In his *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture* (1989), out of his background as a Muslim, he notes that while Muslims must learn Arabic if they truly wish to read the Koran properly and pray devoutly, Christians confess a God who has translated Himself into human flesh and blood. Christ's words, spoken in Aramaic or a form of later Hebrew, are almost all translated into Greek by the evangelists who supply the account of Christ's life, death and resurrection. When Christians come to new people groups, they first begin to learn the language, so that they can translate Scripture into the language of the people to whom they have come.

Sanneh argues that whenever the Christian faith comes to a culture, the culture is never the same again. He also argues that every culture shapes the Christian faith through its own peculiar characteristics and circumstances. That is God's *modus operandi* as He comes into cultures; it also poses a problem and even a threat to the purity of the message because cultural values and perceptions of reality can twist and alter the message of the apostles and prophets. Christians have the temptation to bring the past and their own places into the conversation alongside and perhaps even dominating what they are trying to say from Scripture itself. Therefore, Christian witnesses are always turning in prayer to the Holy Spirit to request His presiding over their own formulations and explanations of the biblical message as they testify to their Lord.

Because of this, it is important to try to define what "culture" is and what it does in human life. One working

definition of culture views it as "the organic (that is, with mutually related elements) whole of human activities and relationships, which define the meaning and significance of life for a specific group of people linked by these elements in a common identity and in common endeavors. Sharing a culture presumes shared assumptions, values and allegiances. It involves systems, institutions and individuals. Every culture has subcultures within it, sharing similar characteristics in specific spheres of life."

There are many elements of culture. Some of them play a relatively small and insignificant role in the life of the church and have little significance for Christian witness. Others are essential parts of the context of the search for place, respect, identity, security and meaning in people's lives and must be addressed as people move ever deeper into the appropriation and practice of the faith in Christ. A list of aspects or elements of culture includes:

1. Language and literature, including common media experiences
2. Social structures and relationships: class, neighborhood, family/clan
3. Economic relationships: production, distribution, use of products, with workplace, marketing and consumption
4. Political institutions and practices
5. Sports, leisure, recreation
6. Music and the graphic arts
7. Science and technology
8. Health care
9. Media and communication
10. Military service
11. Education
12. Festivals - public and individual rites of passage
13. Death, burial and interactions with the dead
14. Humor
15. Transportation

Other aspects also may seem important to participants in the session and offer further food for

thought about the impact of these factors on the conversation partners.

Michael DeJonge of the University of South Florida and Christiane Tietz of the University of Zurich conducted a workshop on the translation of religion a few years ago (*Translating Religion. What Is Lost and Gained?*, 2015). They argue that all religions are continually expressing the meaning of their authoritative texts, whether written or oral, for and to new generations and sometimes into new geographical and cultural contexts. DeJonge and Tietz label this “linguistic-historical contextualization.” It is a process that renders message and practice from one field of understanding to another, even within the same language, as time and events give words new shades of meaning and raise new questions or challenges to be addressed. Historically distinct situations must find a linking bridge in the “historical transplantation of ideas and experiences” (which are always related). DeJonge and Tietz conclude that Christianity assigns ultimate authority to what God has done in history as it is reported in Holy Scripture.

Witnessing always involves translation of the inspired message of the Bible into the world of our conversation partners and the vision of the ultimate and absolute, as well as of the realities of daily existence, that they have molded or had molded for themselves.

Our testimony to the love of God in Christ Jesus cannot be submitted to standards of proof or methods of proving that God has given us for the governance of the creaturely structures He shaped for His universe. Paul constructs an introduction to the contrasting ways of learning and knowing that God has placed at our disposal in 1 Cor. 1 and 2. His introduction to epistemology (ways in which we learn or know) focused on what accomplishes our learning of God and the realities of human life as He has created them. What the apostle calls the methods of the Jews demands something akin to empirical or experimental verification in signs of some sort

that can be subjected to human examination and substantiation or authentication. God does not submit His Word or Himself to that kind of empirical or experimental testing. The Greeks, Paul notices, depended on rational argument. As valuable as rational argument is for many spheres of human life, rational arguments, always framed in specific cultural contexts according to specific cultural values, will not yield corroboration or confirmation of God’s truth, either. Paul does not mention it, but sometimes we learn aesthetically, through our sense of beauty or ugliness, but God does let our sense of the fair and the fine judge His revelation, either.

As children experience, some things just have to be learned from the voice of authority. God’s authority flows from His demonstration of His power and His wisdom in what seems impotent and foolish to the world. Therefore, the children of God may resort to apologetic arguments derived from our reasoning or our archeological or natural scientific discoveries, but resting our relationship with God on such foundations is an offense to our Creator. His authority determines what is true simply by His saying it. Our reaction to what He says takes form in acceptance or rejection. Those are the only choices when authority speaks.

Therefore, our witness may indeed deconstruct false systems of belief and call into question the efficacy of inadequate sources of identity, security and meaning through our reason or some kind of evidence we regard as empirically proven. Nonetheless, the power of God to change sinners into His children comes alone through the seemingly weak and foolish word from the cross that echoes out of His empty tomb.

TALKING POINTS

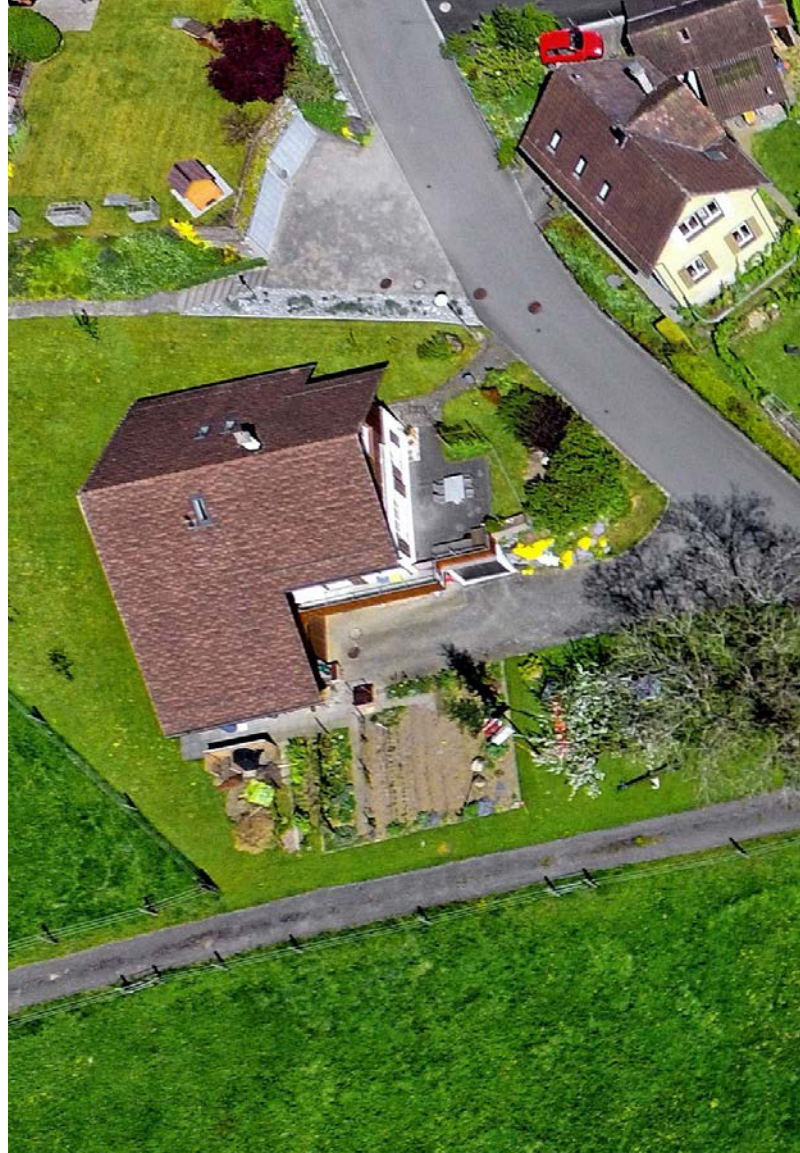
What role do various elements of culture and the several aspects of religion play in our witness?

Session 5

The Creator shaped human life within a grand variety of historical situations and cultural developments. In his Greek culture, stability and permanence existed for Aristotle only in human obedience to an eternal law since he had no personal Creator to guide the universe with his word or his hand. Aristotle's Unmoved Mover did not have that capability as an impersonal power. Apart from that unchanging law, there could be no sense of security, and security was destroyed by human violation of the law. Security also was destroyed for the ancient Hebrews by human violation of the law, but for them it was not the law nor human keeping of it that ensures stability, security and safety for humankind. God alone is the reliable stabilizer of human life. God's Word alone is the active agent for providing ultimate peace, order and security. God comes to be that reliable foundation for life and totally trustworthy companion of human beings through life in every historical situation and each cultural condition.

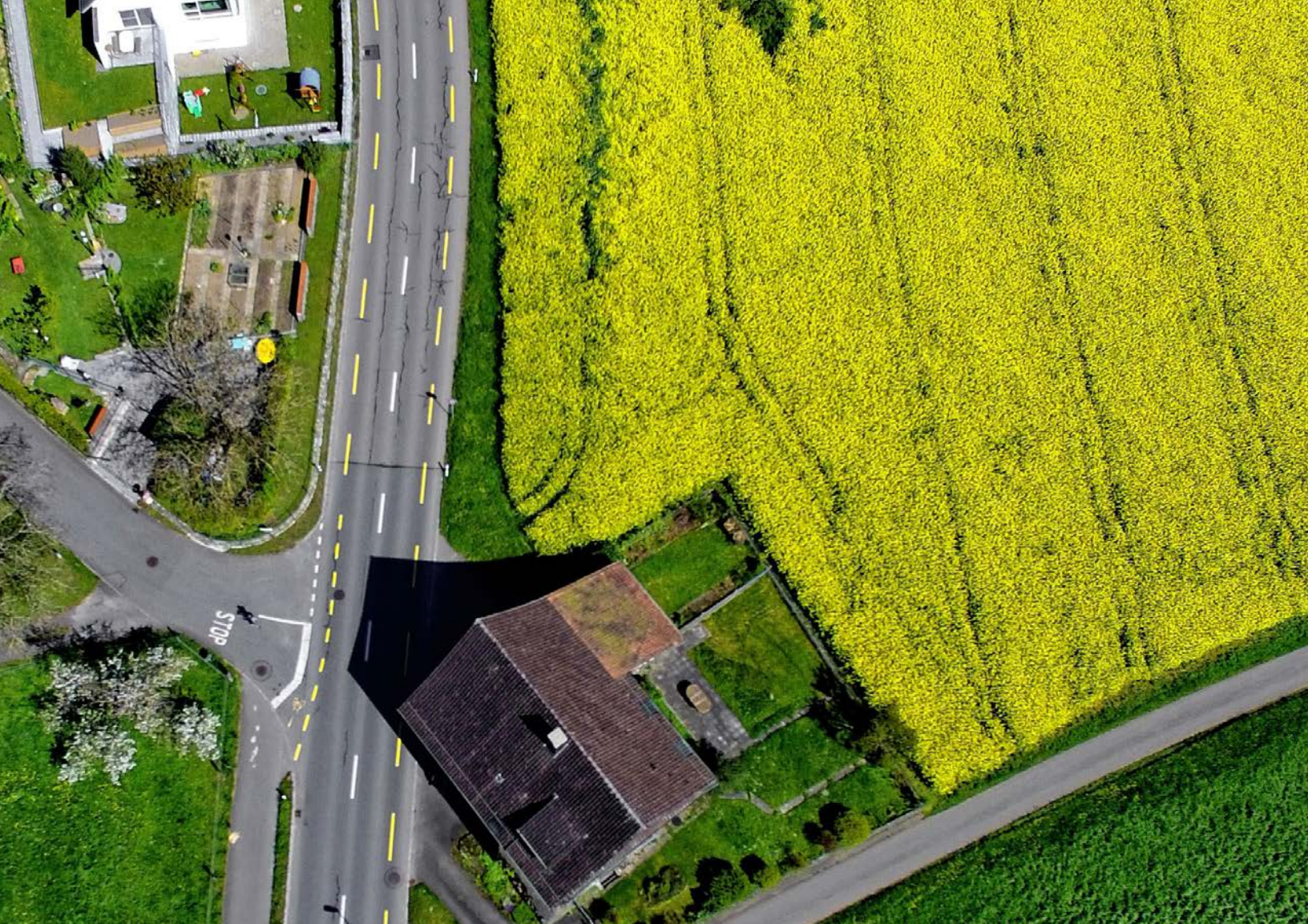
More than a half century ago Yale Divinity School Professor H. Richard Niebuhr formulated an analysis of the varying ways in which Christians have understood the best relationship between themselves and their cultural settings (*Christ and Culture*, 1951). His first category, "Christ against culture," set purified groups of believers, among his historical examples Anabaptists and monastic orders, in opposition to the cultural norms, claiming to live a holier kind of life than the culture permits. One problem, of course, that plagues this ideal model is that those raised in the culture or with contacts with it take elements of the culture along when they separate themselves.

A second approach Niebuhr labels "Christ of culture." Its practitioners redefine their faith to such an extent in terms of the values and principles of the culture that little of the biblical message remains. Thirdly, some Christians see a continuity between Christ and culture, based on the rational analysis of human life that needs completion through the revelation of Scripture but which supplies a good deal of proper



estimation of reality through reason. Niebuhr's own preference is for the "Christ transforms culture" model, which posits active Christian involvement on the basis of biblical law in forming and governing the culture.

Niebuhr's fourth of five options is that which he assigns to St. Paul and Luther, among others. He labels it "Christ and culture in paradox." In fact, there is nothing paradoxical in Luther's distinction of two realms, one indeed governed by reasonable principles that believers and those outside the faith share for the administration of the things of earthly existence, the other governed by the Gospel, which establishes the new identity of the child of God and which empowers these reborn children to live out lives of righteousness. Luther's "Christ and culture in two dimensions" approach also takes sin and evil seriously while never abandoning the conviction that God is the Creator of all cultures and the Lord of cultures



even when they stray from His plan for human life. Thus, Lutherans should have a high appreciation of God's gifts in their culture while being openly critical of their own faults and flaws. The intricate balancing of appreciation and critique poses a challenge for our participation in many aspects of our culture, but it also offers the door to our being a blessing for those around us.

Such perceptions of our surroundings shape and guide our interaction with conversation partners. It creates a sympathy for those caught in the delusions of the culture, and it enjoys the presence of cultural gifts in the lives of our acquaintances that give us a basis for talking about the Creator of those gifts. This understanding of God as Lord of our culture also gives us sensitivity to appreciating the aches and pains of the whole person, the gifts God has already given to the whole person, and the need for the forgiving and

restoring balm of the Gospel of Christ for the whole person with whom we are interacting in our witness.

TALKING POINTS

In this session participants may define the culture as they view and experience it, and try to determine how they as individuals and as a congregation do and should live in the midst of the culture. You may discuss what it means that your congregation exists as a subculture within the larger North American culture, and what obstacles and challenges new converts face as they are integrated into the subculture of the congregation. You also may explore the relationship between the larger culture and the identities of individual members of the congregation and the congregation as a community within that culture. You should assess what theological challenges the culture poses to the Christian message and how we might meet them.

Session 6

God's Word contains His telling human beings of His great love for them, from the moment He created them, through their rejection of Him, to His reclaiming them as His children and re-creating them as faithful human beings. God's Word also contains His telling us of His plans for the good life, which He wants us to enjoy. Luther labeled the first of these forms of His Word "Gospel" and the second "Law."

Luther viewed God's plan for human living as a good gift, which rebellious human beings have turned into a lethal weapon that threatens them with judgment and death. Luther's colleague Philip Melancthon stated that "the law always accuses." Luther himself recognized that while that is indeed true, those who are not listening to God often do not hear the accusation and condemnation and usually do not take it personally. But Luther recognized that the Law does more than accuse. It crushes, as Jeremiah (23:39) proclaimed, like a hammer smashing a rock to smithereens. Furthermore, Luther experienced, it terrifies. Luther knew that human guilt lies at the heart of the problem, but he mentioned it relatively seldom in his preaching, compared to his talking about the fears that beset human life. Today people may not consciously fear God's wrath, but they are often unsettled by fears of failure, of the collapse of dreams, of an uncertain future, of not being able to be the person they want to be.

Luther did not think of the human reaction to God's Law in the first instance as a matter of behavior. Actions spring from attitudes, and that is why God first commanded His human creatures to substitute nothing for Him as the ultimate source of their sense of place, respect, identity, security and meaning. No other prisms! Luther translated for German children, "You are to have no other gods before me," into the explanation or paraphrase, "you are to fear, love and trust in God above all else." That failure to fear, love and trust in God above all things lay for him at the root of all disobedience, the failure to hear or hearken to the other commandments. We are not to hurt or

harm others physically but to help and support them in all bodily needs because we fear and love God, as Luther explained and had the children learning his catechism explain.

Therefore, when we think of witnessing to God's Law, we must remember that it is first of all dedicated to describing the relationship expressed on our side in the fear, love and trust that God ordained to determine our identities and the way we view ourselves as we relate to Him. As a result, every broken relationship that results in physical harm, sexual abuse, mishandling of property or damaging reputations, stems from our failure to fear, love and trust in God above all things. God's Law addresses victims of those sinful acts and broken relationships as well as the perpetrators of disobedience. All need to be pointed to Christ.

Eventually, the accusation of the Law and the guilt of conscience will play an essential role in the daily repentance of those who come to faith. However, our initial conversations do not need to wait for confession of guilt or shame before we move on to introducing Jesus to those outside the faith. We need not wait until total despair about their futures as they face some abyss grips them. Whenever God's created structures for life began the squeeze, whenever the cracks in the idolatrous systems of finding place, respect, identity, security and meaning send a cold draft over the lives of our acquaintances, we can begin to tell of our own experiences with the life-restoring, meaning-giving Jesus of Nazareth.

This opens up many more opportunities for us to perceive in our conversations with others. We should never tell them what they should believe. We should tell them what we have experienced as the Holy Spirit has brought hope and comfort to us as the cracks in our lives have left us exposed to uncertain futures and present incursions of evil. Most perpetrators cannot talk about their own violations of God's structure for life until they have also vented their frustration with their being on the receiving end of other people's

aggression or carelessness. Any opportunity to speak of the God who comes to be with us, Immanuel, in the midst of every evil, is a great opportunity.

Christians therefore recognize the complexity of evil. Not every sinful action is the result of willful violation of God's plan for human life. The mysteries of evil and sin are great, and we cannot always explain the addictions and circumstances that capture people's imaginations and drive them away from God. Luther often spoke of the powerlessness of sinners in the face of Satan's manifold might. Therefore, he spoke not only of Christ's atoning dying to place our sin far from us, in the depths of His own tomb, but also of His liberating resurrection to restore the balance to our lives that only His gift of righteousness bestows (Rom. 4:25). Christ's action on our behalf restores our trust in God. It takes away our fears of coming into His presence, and it reconciles us to Him through His expression of the boundless love of the Creator for His human creatures.

God's Good News begins in Eden and continues in every disclosure of His providential goodness. But Luther reserved the term "Gospel" specifically for His gracious decision, without any merit or worthiness in us, to choose us as members of His family, and to accomplish our reincorporation into that family through Christ's death and resurrection. Luther could not imagine God's saving plan apart from the incarnation of the second person of the Holy Trinity as Jesus of Nazareth and His holy life. He never suggested an alternative to Christ's suffering or to His ascension even though He granted in theory the possibility that God could have chosen another way to save, which He did not pursue. But the heart of Christ's work of deliverance and liberation, Luther was certain, took place, as Paul indicated in Rom. 4:25 or 1 Cor. 15:3-5. He died and was buried in order to bury our failure to be the human beings He created us to be. He rose from the dead and confirmed His resurrection by appearing to His disciples in order to restore our righteousness in God's sight and in relationship to others.

Therefore, Luther preached that Christ had abolished our sins by taking our place under the sentence of the Law, which can only be satisfied by the death of the sinners. The wages of sin is death. No extra effort to be obedient and fulfill the law through human action (Rom. 6:23a) can erase or reverse the death sentence. Eternal life is always the gift of God, not a reward for obedience, actual or vicarious (Rom. 6:23b). Christ died to take away our sin and it is gone. He rose then as the Redeemer who liberates His people from captivity to sin. His resurrection inaugurates God's re-creation of sinners into children of God. They are born again. Finally, Luther emphasized that Christ died and rose in order to take possession of His people. He acquired possession by shedding His blood for His people that they might be His own and live under His rule, serving Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness.

Luther understood this gift of a new identity as having two aspects. God gives new birth and thus new identity to His chosen people without any condition. They simply belong to Him and are members of His family. That means that they project this new identity into the world around them. Those who have heard God say, "I have made you righteous in my sight through Christ," want to demonstrate that they are righteous children of God by living righteously in this world. They praise God with fellow believers and serve all people with whom they come in contact, living out God's love and mercy so that others may experience it from their hand. Luther called this the distinction of two kinds of righteousness, or two-fold righteousness. It was the foundation and framework for his understanding of what it means to be human and to be Christian.

TALKING POINTS

Your discussion can revolve around the participants' experiences of God's address in Law and Gospel in their lives.

Session 7

The chart that forms the basis of this session, “Assessing the Evil and Speaking the Gospel,” is not a complete overview of situations in which Christians are called to give witness to their faith in Christ. There are many questions and conversations raised by, at least on the surface, purely intellectual concerns or objections to the biblical worldview. These concerns need to be dealt with patiently and rationally, examining presuppositions of the conversation partner’s point of view and listening for the unspoken presumptions. Perhaps these presumptions are lying below the level of consciousness, as unexpressed ideas too important to verbalize lest they be challenged — or unchallengeable for some searchers.

This chart is designed to spur thinking and limber up the mind. Too often believers think in terms of guilt and forgiveness as the problem and the solution through which we bring Christ to those outside the faith. Indeed, believers do come to recognize their guilt and they long for all that the forgiveness of the Father gives, including new identity and a new way of life. But admitting guilt is an invitation to be judged; confession of sins legitimizes condemnation. Most people are not able to do that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit though sometimes we encounter those whose self-contempt has grown strong enough to do that. The chart originated from conversations with friends who talked about the needs of members of congregations who come to the Sunday morning service with a variety of burdens, not always with the burden of guilt. Other friends talked to me about their conversations with those outside the faith, describing the subjects they were eager to talk about, which very seldom included the feelings of guilt.

Because the Good News that Christ embodies and has acted out is so rich and deep, there are many ways of speaking of our Lord and what He has done for sinners that meet the vast array of what can go wrong in our lives. This chart is to serve as the basis for exploring at least some of those possibilities for evils of one sort or another, through our own fault or the fault of someone else or something other than

ourselves. In this session, discussion should revolve around the impact of the Law and the various kinds of cracks or fissures it opens up in our lives simply because it is God’s structure for the good life. The next two sessions should serve as forums for exploring this rich, deep message of forgiveness, deliverance and new birth that we label “the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” However, it is probably unavoidable that talk of how God’s expression of His love in Christ Jesus will flow from the discussion of the forms of evil.

Students have reminded me that we are sometimes confronted by those who have convinced themselves that their own substitute sources for a stabilizing sense of place, respect, identity, security and meaning are working well and they need no conversation with or about the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus. They have the attitude that life is working well.

At best, they may have some inkling that adding another god to their pantheon could not hurt; a variety of eternal life insurance policies, or programs for getting through the night and coping with tomorrow, is always good. Some may have intellectual curiosity about what a Christian really has to say. Others may be curious why in small ways they can notice a difference in the way we live at work, in the neighborhood, at the sports club — different than most people around us. It is difficult to prepare for any one of these conversations simply because many people in our culture fall into this category. We must know what and why we believe what we do and pray for the Holy Spirit’s lending His powers of memory to ours when we walk into such conversations.

We often meet people whose peace of mind and psychological equilibrium have been shaken, even if not totally undermined, by evil things that happen from totally outside their own control. Life may be interrupted and shaken by nature, by fire, earthquake, flood or other natural disaster that damages or destroys dwelling places and disorients finances, self-confidence, health and other aspects of the future we were counting on. When people are fairly confident

Assessing the Evil and Speaking the Gospel

FORMS OF EVIL	ATTITUDES OF THE SECURE FALSE BELIEVER	ATTITUDES OF THE SHAKEN FALSE BELIEVER	DELIVERY OF THE BENEFITS OF CHRIST
Self-deluding confidence in false gods, creating a virtual reality <i>Everything is working just fine.</i>	No need for any other prism for the good life	Search for a new equilibrium	Friendship, building trust in anticipation of eventual readiness to hear the Gospel
Misfortunes visited by people or forces outside my control <i>It hit me like a ton of bricks.</i>	Determination to take control, fired by rage and desire for revenge	Confusion, fear, paralysis	<i>Christus Victor</i> , God as friendly Lord, Christ as companion, guide, friend
Addiction <i>I am in bondage.</i>	Mastery of the object of addiction, relishing its pleasures, indifference to consequences	Feeling of being trapped, isolated	God's gift of new identity through pronouncement, in spite of continuing battles against temptations
Loneliness, alienation, estrangement <i>To whom can I turn?</i>	Snubbing of those in relationship, exploitation of the relationship	Divorce, separation, bitter feuding	Christ's reconciliation of us with the Father, even when earthly relationships cannot be mended: new identity as one loved
Meaninglessness, lack of goals and hopes <i>What's the use anyway?</i>	Attempts to find pleasure and satisfaction wherever one can, defensiveness	Bad self-image, anger with false offers of hope, apathy, emptiness	Christ's investing His blood in us, affirming our worth as creatures of God
Weakness or failure to do what one knows is right <i>Why did I forget, why did I slip up?</i>	Excuses for why one did what one did not want to do, or did what one was trying to avoid doing ever again	Shame, perplexity, disgust and impatience with self	Affirmation of worth on the basis of God's adoption and acceptance of us, and His will to transform us
Disobedience <i>I know it is wrong, but I am going to do it anyway.</i>	Self-justification, denial that anyone else was hurt	Guilt	Christ's substituting Himself, receiving our punishment for sin, and rising to discard that sin
Death <i>The doctor says it's all over for me.</i>	Denial of the diagnosis, search for cures, bargaining for time	Terror, depression	Christ's resurrection and assurance of life forever with Him

that their old system for holding life together can regain control and set life on the same old path again, a determination to assume mastery of life may be coupled with anger. Rage against nature is frustrating. More satisfying is rage directed against other human beings. Even that seems empty, however, when it is the distant board of directors of the firm for which we have worked for several decades that decides to close the local plant, or the management of the bank that refused to cooperate with making some dream come true. It may be the burglar or the drunken driver or the mean-spirited boss at work who disrupts the harmonies that have kept us on an even keel. But revenge never quite makes up for the hurts we have suffered. So confusion, fear and paralysis can accompany and even replace the rage that possesses us when human forces have disturbed our equilibrium and dislocated the foundation of our happiness or our success. Witness in these situations begins with sharing grief and tears. The witness of our concern through our presence provides a basis for the unfolding conversation.

Addictions seem to exercise a power over a human being that comes from outside the self. But the burden of not being able to resist sometimes overpowers our firmly held certainties that “I could quit any time I want” or “this is just an innocent sidebar of my life.” The regret and remorse that comes when the addiction drives us to harm other people, particularly the ones we love but also those upon whom we depend, also weighs down the addict. Finally, he or she can no longer ignore the hurt that the habit visits upon family and friends. Boasting of the pleasure and/or of the self-control begins to sound empty. The nature of addictive pleasures as captors and oppressors only gradually comes clear. Feelings of being trapped in the cage of the highs and lows of putting another stack of chips on the table or taking one more swallow or puff start to be scarier and scarier. The impression of isolation can drive a person up the wall. Christian witness again begins with listening and patience, with an attempt to understand what is not understandable to those who have never experienced addiction. Only when trust has been brought into a world in which trust has been dying

under the suffocating weight of the addiction can this conversation partner begin to listen.

North American individualism has introduced an unprecedented amount and level of loneliness, feelings of alienation and estrangement into our culture. Too many of us live under the illusion that human beings can stand on their own two feet despite the Creator’s observing that “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Human creatures are hardwired for life in community. The fact that many citizens of the United States think that they have enough money to live independent lives has undermined the social support for them that comes from recognizing that importance of having someone you can trust with your inmost thoughts, fears and hopes. Those whose false gods still delude them into thinking that place and respect are not so important will snub those who make relationships difficult, or they will try to exploit those whom they do not like in their circles of family or friends. Alienation from the world around us, however, spins the illusion of self-sufficiency out of us and leaves us dry and limp. The life of divorce from spouse or children, from employer or employees, from neighbors and friends, creates a lonely separation and sometimes bitter feuding when the stakes mount higher and higher. The passion to find new ways to hurt, offend and insult sparks the only briefly satisfying pleasure of revenge. Affirming listening, with sensitive challenging of false presuppositions and inaccurate reading of the other person(s) as well as the conversation partner, can begin an ongoing exchange with the alienated and estranged. Such conversation leads to talking about what Christ’s reconciliation of straying and defiant creatures to the Father and the family of the children of God truly means for interpersonal relationships on this earth.

For increasing numbers of North Americans, at all economic levels of society, the question of the meaninglessness of their activities on the job, but also at home and in the neighborhood seems on the rise. The sense of self-worth has declined markedly in public conversation in recent years. For those who

think that life just has to hang together somehow, there may be compensation in “getting all the gusto you can,” as an advertisement for beer some years ago suggested, with the reminder “because you only go around once.” When the anger with false offers of hope turns to apathy and emptiness, and the contempt or at least dislike for oneself begins to get the upper hand, the example of Christian peace and joy can invite us to speak about the reasons that Christ fashions such serenity and delight in the midst of the same world that has disappointed those with whom we speak. In the midst of what the French call “*ennui*,” a sense of discouragement and disappointment over oneself or those in whom we had put trust, or disillusionment over our future or the prospects of our society, the believer’s confidence in the presence of God no matter what projects a certain warmth in an ever colder world.

A bit short of outright defiance of what we know is right and the embrace of what we know is wrong is the weakness that generates careless or forgetful interactions with others that make us say with St. Paul, “the good that I know I should do just somehow does not get done, but doing the wrong I have resolved to avoid happens all too easily” (Rom. 7:15-16). When we think we can hold life together with the gods that have always sufficed, we find excuses for forgetting to do what we know we should or for falling just this once, but once more, into a way of treating others or reacting to them that we cannot justify. When we begin to question why our measures to do what is right and avoid the wrong broke down, we are puzzled. We become angry with ourselves and ashamed for not being on top of our own will and decision-making.

Some people whom we meet will admit that what they are doing is wrong, contrary to the company’s rules, the neighborhood regulations or maybe even some higher moral code, but at the same time they announce, initially at least, that they have no intention of changing. To preserve some sense of personal integrity, most people of sound mind will try to justify what they are doing nonetheless. They will deny that

others are hurt or insist that this action makes up for some disadvantage that has been imposed upon them. When their devices for justification of their misdeeds break down, they may express some sense of shame, out of embarrassment or anger with themselves for being too weak-willed. They may express simple guilt. This gives an opening to move quickly to the heart of the Gospel of the One who died for our sin and rose to justify us and restore our righteous identity as children of God.

The chart concludes with the evil of death. Death need not be connected at all with guilt. It is usually perceived as another enemy from outside ourselves that has invaded our bodies and is slowly or more rapidly taking power over them. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote some years ago about stages of coping with death (*On Death and Dying*, 1969), as did Ernest Becker (*The Denial of Death*, 1973). Initial reactions when we still believe that our old gods can hold on against this foe do indeed deny the diagnosis or search for cures and bargain for more time. But sooner or later the terror and depression set in. Cheery language of hope and resurrection may initially be offensive to the person for whom they have not been categories, so Christian witness must again proceed with patience and lots of listening as well as moments of shared tears. But our expression of confidence in the life after death that Christ promises becomes the Holy Spirit’s entrance into such lives.

There are no specific goals for this session. Each group will find its own way into the chart and from the chart into experiences and challenges for witnessing in the lives of the participants. What is important is that they try to view life from the perspective of those who are caught in one form of evil or another and do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The better we have some sense for the dilemmas of others, the better we will be able to tell them about Jesus in a way that can begin to pierce through their nonbiblical worldviews with a message of hope and wholeness.

Session 8

The term “Gospel” has many definitions. It is much more than merely “Good News for a bad situation.” It is the Good News of Jesus Christ, of the second person of the Holy Trinity, who is also Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew who walked on this earth for 30-some years two millennia ago. The Gospel presents what He has done, and it presents His person, as the biblical writers sketched it for us.

He is both God and this human person who bore the name Jesus, as the angel told Joseph (Matt. 1:21). He is Immanuel, for in this totally human individual is God, present in human history, for us. Questions regarding the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity should be answered before the session continues.

The biblical writers often describe who Jesus is by way of titles. These titles offer good talking points to connect with the needs of the person outside the faith with whom we are speaking. The discussion for this session can begin with participants who are willingly telling the group what their favorite title for Jesus is and what it means to them personally — why it speaks to them.

For an organized presentation of biblical titles, the leader may turn to any number of theologies of the New Testament or biblical Christologies. Authors each have their own groupings or classifications. In my *Speaking the Gospel Today*, you can find a four-fold classification: Jesus as Revealer, Jesus as Vicar and Victim, Jesus as Victor, and Jesus as Companion and Guide. In each of these categories you find specific titles that relate to the general classification. One problem with every such system of analysis is that some of the titles which the biblical writers describe in their presentation of Jesus fit in more than one category. We should not let the categories take us captive but simply use them to deepen our familiarity with their biblical use. As you discuss these names or descriptions of Jesus, you may suggest categories on the chart on Page 19 “Assessing the Evil and Speaking the Gospel,” which the particular names address and with which they would be appropriate and helpful.

North Americans live in a culture of information. We depend on a variety of media to supply us information as complete — but also as succinct — and as quickly as possible. Jesus is the One who supplies us with information about God, ourselves and the reality of the world into which God has placed us. A selection of the titles assigned to Jesus that talk about His revelation of God and the reality of His creation includes the concept of Jesus as Lord. He is the Lord God come close enough to hear and touch. In His incarnation He did not reveal all that there is to know about God. Creatures cannot by definition know everything about their Creator. It is a good reminder of our creatureliness and dependence on God that we confront mysteries in the person of this God-man and in His message about the restoration of humanity to those who have trashed their humanness by running away from their Creator. Lordship included protection of and provision for those subject to a lord in the ancient world, and so this term that sounds negative to us had a very positive connotation in Jesus’ time. Some lords were indeed tyrants, but they were not being what a lord should be. In Jesus’ lordship was a claim to be the lord that the Roman emperors wished to be by using this term to assert their status as gods. “Lord” was also the Hebrew and Aramaic expression that pious Jews substituted for the holy name of *Jahweh*. Confessing Jesus as Lord, as Thomas did, identified Him also as God (John 20:28).

Paul’s designating Jesus as “the image of God” (e.g., 2 Cor. 4:4, Col. 1:15, cf. Heb. 1:3) recalls other passages that reflect the belief that He revealed God as the divine glory dwelling among human creatures (John 1:14). Further analogies represent what that image of God tells us, for instance, in the picture of the love of God in the brood hen (Matt. 23:37). John calls Jesus the Word of God that created at the beginning of this creation and the Word that revealed God by becoming a human being (John 1:1-18). John 1 also is a good place to turn to see the use of the depiction of Jesus as the light that breaks through the darkness and lights up our world. He reveals what is true and what is false; He unveils the God who is reliable as well

as the lies of the deceiver, and who warms the world with His light. Jesus is also prophet and teacher, bringing God's message of life and salvation into the world.

Jesus came to take our place under the condemnation of the Law as well. The Law gives only a pass or a no pass, and all human beings, even those who try their hardest, fail to fear, love and trust in God above all things, to say nothing of obey the other commandments perfectly. Therefore, the no pass means death for all sinners (Rom 6:23a). Jesus went to the cross to die "for our sin" (Rom. 4:25) and buried sin in His tomb (Rom. 6:4, Col. 2:12). He became our "Vicar," the one who takes our place, in the face of God's wrath and the Law's condemnation to death. He became the victim whom Isaiah described as the suffering servant of God in chapters 42, 49, 50 and 52-53. He atoned for sin, abolishing it by nailing its indictment to the cross, where its legibility disappeared in the soaking of blood (Col. 2:14). It is natural for those who feel their guilt and recognize their sinfulness to be reluctant to give it to Christ for burial in His tomb. It means complete dependence on Him. But He is God, and He wants our sin to be delivered into His tomb. He also serves as the priest who is both the one sacrificing and the sacrifice, in the imagery of ancient Israel. As priest He also intercedes for us and pleads our case, pointing to His own death and resurrection as the answer to the charges against us.

Jesus also rose to restore our righteousness (Rom. 4:25). Several titles in the New Testament make concrete His profile as the victor over death, the grave, our sin and God's anger at our sin. He is the King, who exercises full power over any and every form of evil. He is the Savior, who rescues those who are dying and restores them to the health of salvation. He is the Son of Man, who, adapting Dan. 7:13-14, shares God's characteristics and rules in the midst of a chaotic world. He is the Second Adam (Rom. 5:12-17), who reversed the damage done by the first Adam in Genesis 3. He reversed death's claim on His people and restored them to righteousness and life through His resurrection.

Jesus is also the companion and guide whom we meet day in and day out as we read Scripture and meditate on what God has done for us through the work of our Savior. A number of New Testament titles for Jesus — and some from the Old Testament — point to His presence in our lives, in the face of the problems and challenges of the everyday, sometimes reflecting also His work of restoring us to our Edenic humanity in trust toward Him, but also applicable to our need for companionship and guidance. These titles include "Physician," "the Good Shepherd," "the Bread of Life," "the Head of the Body" and "the Bridegroom." Other images, such as that of a loving father to children in Matt. 10:13-16, also can help us present Christ as the person who is there, present, for us in the face of life's little vexations as well.

TALKING POINTS

The discussion in this session should help participants express what Jesus means to them and what significance His love has had for them in specific situations. The sharing of such experiences and perspectives will expand and broaden the ability of all to introduce Him to the people they meet in the normal course of daily life.

Session 9

Introducing Jesus by describing who He is inevitably involves talking about what He has done and continues to do for us. In this session we will discuss some of the Bible's language and some of the church's traditional terminology for His activities, putting the lively verbs of Scripture into nouns that we hope summarize the dynamic of what God accomplished as Jesus was born, lived the perfect human life, suffered, died, was buried and rose again to restore our humanity to its fullness.

Christians talk a lot about salvation, but that has become a foreign word for most North Americans. In fact, the New Testament writers do not use the words related to "save" a great deal. But Jesus is called "Savior" in Titus 2:13, together with the title "God." There the concepts of redemption or liberation and of purification are used to delineate what God as Savior does. One Hebrew word for "salvation" equates it with being let into open spaces, a kind of release from confinement. Both Hebrew and Greek concepts that are translated "salvation" involve prosperity and health, indicating that when God saves, He not only rescues and unshackles but restores the wholeness of our humanity. Related to this healing of our afflictions are concepts of purification and cleansing that offer a washing of regeneration that bestows a new identity as it buries the old identity in Christ's tomb to those who feel stained and besmirched by their own actions or the actions of others who have exploited and otherwise abused them.

Redemption grasped the minds of the Hebrews in the Old Testament, for it was the word that was used for what God did in leading His people out of Egypt. No analogy projects complete dependence on the imagery being used, and in the case of the Exodus, the redemption involved no ransom payment to Pharaoh; the focus was fixed on the liberation of God's people. Christ certainly paid the price of His lifeblood in liberating us from our alienation from God, but He did not pay it as a ransom to our captor, Satan. Our Redeemer just smashed our kidnapper. Redemption speaks directly to people who feel the constraints

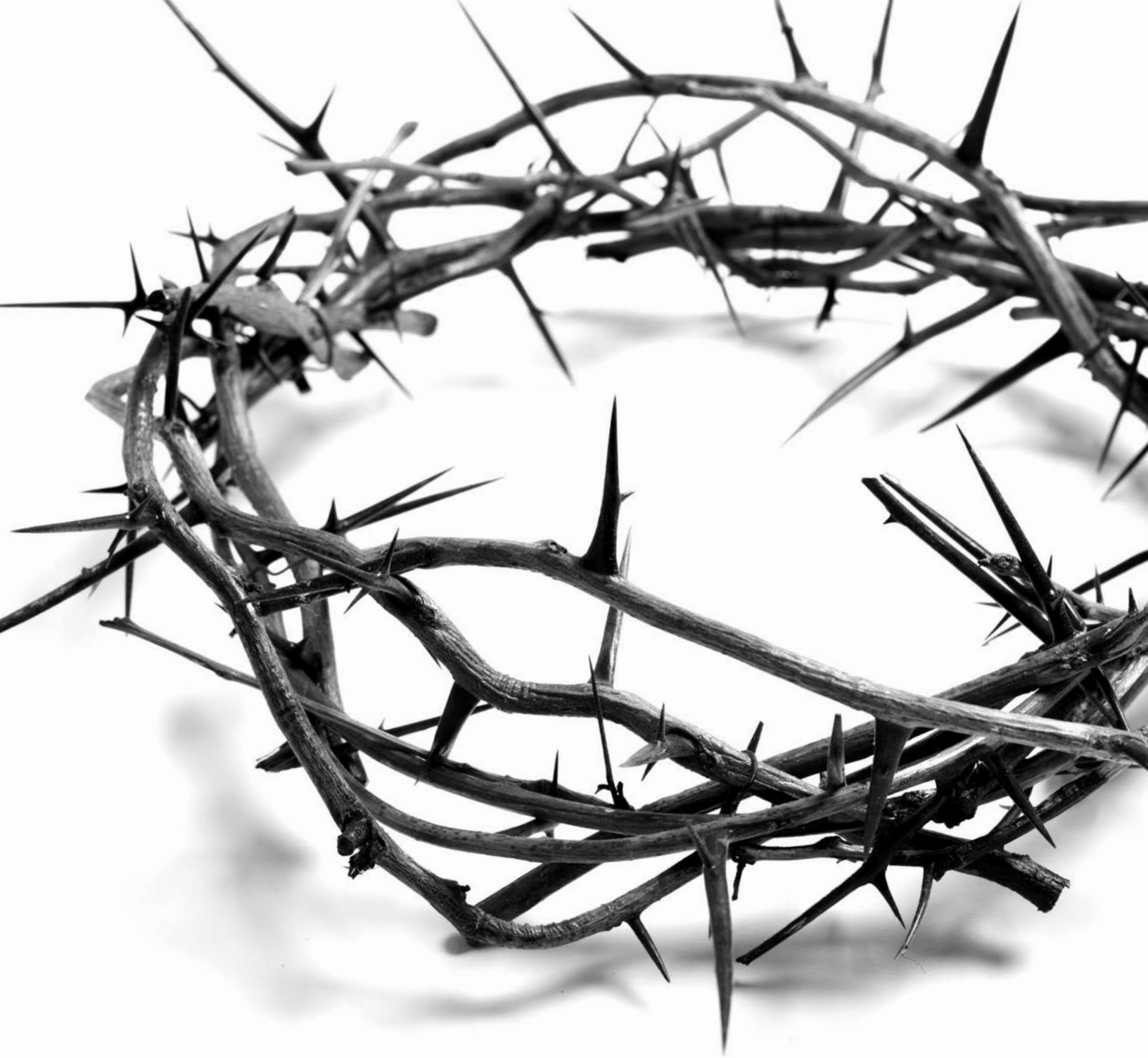
of their straying from God's paths and who long for freedom to be the kind of human being God made them to be, the human creature who can enjoy life to the fullest.

Resurrection is related to this redemption as the restoration of life (Rom. 6:8-13, Col. 3:1). The concept of new birth or re-creation, being fashioned anew in God's image through Christ, joins the Lord's coming out of the grave with the idea that we return to the Edenic relationship of trust in the God who loves us to the utmost that Adam and Eve experienced as God's gift of life came to them. Adoption also expresses Christ's bringing us back into God's family (Rom. 8:15, 23. Gal. 4:5, Eph. 1:5), a word for the lonely and isolated that reaffirms the new identity as child of God that Christ offers them.

The alienated and estranged also can appreciate what it means that God reconciles us to Himself through Christ. The image of Christ as the great high priest in Hebrews creates the possibility of using one of the Latin words for priest, *pontifex*, literally bridge-builder, to speak of His reconciliation in terms of His building the bridge to return to our home in God's presence, no matter how far we may have strayed from those earthly places where we have previously felt at home.

Forgiveness is related to reconciliation as the change that alters a relationship by abolishing the significance, even if not always the memory, of past offenses. It can be said that, even though we find it psychologically impossible sometimes to forget even if we forgive (and sometimes the memory of injustice should be kept alive even when it has been forgiven), we remember things (sins) that God has forgotten. They are no longer part of His reckoning with us, for the Father has credited our sin to Christ, who has claimed it as His own and buried it in His tomb.

He did that as He justified us. That is, He restored our righteousness. He has made us righteous by a re-creative Word of forgiveness and liberation that connects us with Christ and implants in us the impact



of His death and resurrection. The German theologian Oswald Bayer dismisses the oft-heard comment that “justification” is a term that modern people in the Western world do not understand. Bayer points out that we are continually justifying what we have done, and thus ourselves, to parents and children, to spouses, to friends, to employers and employees, to neighbors and even sometimes to people we have chanced to meet only briefly. But we never succeed in truly justifying ourselves when we have fouled our own lives or the lives of others. Even when others

accept our self-justification, we often have not convinced ourselves that we are justified. But Christ, as the re-creator of sinners, has restored our identity as children of God. That speaks to many in our culture who are on the search for firm and stable ground under their feet.

TALKING POINTS

This session is again a practice field for talking about fundamental biblical concepts and for exercising mind and mouth in telling the story of our salvation.

Session 10 & Elective Session 11





Practice may eventually make perfect in many spheres of life but probably not in our witness to Christ. Each new opportunity to introduce someone who does not know Him to Jesus will bring special challenges. But we can lower our resistance to beginning conversations that present Him, and we can improve our ability to articulate what He means to us, with practice. This session should be dedicated to such practice with the use of case studies. Perhaps you can move on to role playing on the basis of the situations sketched in the case study scenarios that are found either in those offered here or those that have been composed out of the local experiences of the group using these videos. But in all likelihood the time will be too short to do adequate justice to the group's need and desire to use the time effectively. Therefore, an 11th session without a video, simply to practice case studying and role playing a bit more while the discussions of the past weeks are still fresh, is advisable. This extra session also provides the opportunity to fill out again the personal inventory form used in the first session in order to give participants a glimpse of how their understanding of their own witnessing and the possibilities for witnessing in their own surroundings have changed during the course of the workshop session.

I have found that the best procedure gives a relatively short time for the first venture into a case study, explored in a group of not more than two or three people, and then discussed by the larger group of participants. A second case study can be used with a longer time for the small groups. There may not be time for moving to transforming the case study into role playing in this session, and if that is the case, that exercise should be scheduled for a later time.

Case Studies

CASE STUDY NO. 1

Since last September the Smith family has lived in the house next to yours. Larry Smith assumed a position as a reporter for the local newspaper and his wife, Rachel, is a real estate agent. They have one daughter, Kim, 9 years old.

Kim often wandered into your garden as you were weeding or harvesting vegetables or tending your flowers in September, and you became friends with the little girl. You had occasional conversations to talk to her about the wonder of God's love as you see it in the flowers and the vegetables, some of which you sent home for the Smiths' supper table as well. Since the Smiths were far from family and friends at Thanksgiving, you invited them into your home, and Kim asked questions about the crucifix on your wall. This gave you the opportunity to tell her something about Jesus and to ask if she would like to go to Sunday school. Her parents said that would be a good idea someday; they had not been raised as Christians and had never had much interest in the church.

Today is an icy day in March. You have just gotten home from work, and it occurs to you that Kim also often arrives at home about 3:30 p.m., but today you did not see her. About 35 minutes later you see a police car in front of the Smith house. You see a policeman and Larry Smith rush to the car. A half hour later a call comes from the hospital. Rachel Smith is on the phone and tells you that Kim was hit by a car sliding on the ice as she stood on the sidewalk coming home from school and pleads, "We have no one else, can you be with us now?" You rush to the hospital, and there find that Kim has just died.

Where does Christian witness begin in this kind of situation? What various strategies for Christian witness over a longer term would be possible? What are the first things you would do in this situation?

CASE STUDY NO. 2

Although you are only a junior in high school and a part-time employee at the local supermarket, you have always had good rapport with the people 10 and 20 years older than you who work full-time there.

Nick, the meat market manager, who is 29, has been particularly good to you in spite of his rather rough and uncouth way of talking and joking. You and he have found a common interest in the high school teams and in fishing. These topics have given you a lot to talk about. A couple of times you have met Linda, his wife, as she came to pick Nick up after work. She seems nice, and you could tell that Nick was devoted to her. Once, early last summer, Nick even invited you to come fishing with him and his two boys, Joe and Peter, ages 7 and 5. You could tell that they meant the world to Nick. You have asked Nick if they were going to Sunday school when you discovered they did not know who Jesus is. He said, no, so you asked if you could take the boys to Sunday school with you. Each time you have asked he has always given you the dodge.

This Saturday morning you catch Nick as he comes into the store, about 15 minutes late. You can tell that he has not slept much and is about to cry. Your automatic reaction is to ask, "Hey, man, what is wrong with you?" He blurts out, "Linda is taking the kids and going back to her folks in North Dakota. She hates me and she just wants out. I don't know what I will do without her and the boys. There's not much left in life if all three of them leave."

What do you say at that moment? How can you give witness to your Christian faith to Nick over the coming weeks? How can you support Nick in this time of difficulty?

CASE STUDY NO. 3

Hugo and you have never been particularly close friends even though you have worked at adjoining packaging machines for the last six years. You know that Hugo has enjoyed working at the local food processing firm where you work and where he had been for 42 years. He has prided himself on “doing a good day’s work for a good day’s pay,” as he says time after time. Although he would gripe occasionally about how the company always wanted more than it deserved for the wages he was being paid, he had enjoyed “working with the gang” and had deeply appreciated the little party which the firm had hosted upon his retirement and the gold watch which it had given him for 42 years of work there.

That was six weeks ago. Since then you have stopped by to see Hugo a couple times, once just dropping off some things he had left at the plant, and then to visit because he seemed so lonely and empty. He has just been pattering around in his backyard and talking only about how boring it is not to be at work. His wife complained to you that he just sits and stares or is fussing about things that need to be done without ever doing them.

Finally, this evening you are visiting Hugo, sitting in his backyard, enjoying a can of pop together. He turns and in a troubled voice, says, “You know, I stole \$50,000 worth of product, one little piece at a time, over my years at the company. I don’t deserve the watch; I didn’t deserve the party; heck, I didn’t even deserve the job. I wish I was dead!” He turns away and walks into his house, slamming the door.

What can you do to help Hugo? How can you give witness to your Christian faith to Hugo and his wife in this situation? What is the Gospel for a 65-year-old petty thief?

CASE STUDY NO. 4

A 19-year-old community college student comes with a friend from your congregation to your home. Her friend Kent had always liked you as a youth Bible class leader during high school and knew that you would be able to answer her questions. Kent explains that Megan cannot believe in the Trinity, and he was sure that you would have some answers. He had always found you approachable and knowledgeable. You do not admit it right away, but you know that the doctrine of the Trinity and words like “begotten” and “proceeding” are biblical words used to express the mystery of the distinction between the persons of the Trinity without being able to explain their relationships. But instead of beginning with that approach, you listen. You ask Megan to express the problem in her own words.

It soon becomes clear that Megan’s problem is not a problem of understanding the Trinity. She does not understand the word “god.” As she talks about her life, it is clear that she has experienced the absence of God because she has no sense of trust, the kind of trust to be able to imagine what is meant by the biblical description of God. She is not able to trust because she has, from her point of view, had so little experience with human love. She is now living with grandparents whose major concern is that she be home by an impossibly early 11 p.m. She is not living at home anymore because her parents threw her out of the house at 16 and insisted that she was incorrigible, whereafter a court remanded her to her grandparents. She tells about systematic betrayals by both girlfriends and boyfriends. She cannot mention one person who has ever befriended her without taking advantage of her. She is afraid and suspicious of people, and she sees little purpose to her life.

Where do you start with Christian witness for such a person? What are the possibilities for developing strategies for witnessing to Megan?

CASE STUDY NO. 5

Carl and Carla lived across the street for a long time, and although you have never been to supper in their home or gone to a movie together, you have talked a lot as you work in the front yard or attend school events in the neighborhood. You have invited them to church because you know that they are only nominal members of another church in town and do not even make it every Easter or Christmas. However, they have only seldom accompanied you to something special at church and have shied away from talking about the Christian faith.

They could hardly hold a conversation without bringing up their hopes for one thing or another. Carl and Carla liked to talk about what they were hoping for. They were hoping for better weather, and they were hoping for a new car before Christmas, and they were hoping for good weather on their vacation, and they were hoping for Carl's recovery from a heart attack. All those and many other of the hopes they always were talking about had actually come to pass. However, now, in the category of hope, hard times have hit their household. You have hoped with Carl and Carla that Carla would win the battle against cancer, but recently that hope died for Carl with his wife's passing. They hoped for a long time for better relationships with their children, but you have the impression — although they don't talk about it much anymore — that none of the three prodigals will probably ever darken the horizon of his life again after coming to their mother's funeral, although the stories Carl tells about their relationships to him are contradictory.

In the several weeks since Carla's death Carl has come over to sit on your front porch a number of evenings and share a drink. The word hope has not come up. This evening Carl is coming over and you pull up a chair. He is not able to hold back the tears. After 27 years of working as purchasing agent for old Joe Saunders, old Joe came to Carl today to say that the firm was

bankrupt. Although old Joe thought he would pursue "Chapter 13," he did not have much spirit in the eyes, and Carl observes, "I don't have much hope that at 72 years old, Joe is going to pursue saving the firm." You say, "But Carl, you gotta have hope." Carl looks at you through the tears and says, "Hope? Hell, hope's died, hope's foolish, hope's impossible!"

Where do you begin your witness to Carl in this case? What possible strategies might there be for a longer term witness to him?

CASE STUDY NO. 6

A new fellow employee, Randy, has just found out that you are a Christian. He wants to talk. He begins by saying, "I just do not see how anyone can believe in a god who is a person. You can use the word 'god,' I suppose, to try to give yourself a little encouragement or comfort, if you need that sort of thing, but to think that there is really a someone up there or out there, who is going to be of any help — that is pretty silly! The greater forces that move the universe certainly are not in personal form. You Christians just project yourselves onto a larger screen when you say that there is a personal god."

He continues with more objections: "Prayer is the silliest thing of all. You imagine someone is out there listening to you, even when your prayers never get fulfilled. All you are doing when you pray is talking to yourself. I just do not understand."

He goes on: "And the Bible! That is the craziest collection of stories anyone ever put together. It is just a cleverly written way of getting people to give up thinking and follow the church. Why anyone thinks anything in the book is true is a mystery to me."

Randy waits for your reaction a moment, then pulls out a newspaper clipping, and says, "Now something like this makes sense to me!" It reads:

“The Cosmic Christ filled the Jewish rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, and through his message and his life conveyed to many others the true and holy spirit of the Divine. This same Cosmic Christ is exhibited in others, in whom we see this Holy Spirit of self-sacrifice, the desire to lose the self and attain what is divine, embodied and acted out. The Spirit, through the message of the Christ, beams the light of true life into those whom it chooses to connect with the Divine and draws them through the light of Christ into the Divine, so that they can lose themselves in the love of the Christ and the Spirit.”

Where does Christian witness begin in this kind of situation? What various strategies for Christian witness over a longer term would be possible? What are the first things you would do in this situation?

CASE STUDY NO. 7

Sam is a man about 65-years-old, who lives near the church. You used to take your car to the garage where he worked and have seen him once in a while in the neighborhood. He lost his job as a mechanic nearly 10 years ago and has been able to work only occasionally, usually part-time jobs or chance opportunities to help someone out, ever since. His wife recently died, and his two daughters, who both live in nearby towns, have fought with him over the years. They thought he had not taken good care of their mother as death approached, and so they seldom come to visit him with their families.

You meet Sam on the street one day and chat about the weather. Then he says, pointing in the direction of the church, “I suppose one of these days they will be carrying me out of that place in a coffin. That’s where I would like the funeral to be. They had me baptized there, you know. I wonder if the church would take me back. I never did go there much, but I always thought that someday I’d see what they do in there.”

How would you continue the conversation? What is your longer term strategy for being a Christian friend for Sam?

CASE STUDY NO. 8

Eva has recently been the lady at the cash register when you have gone shopping mornings in the small supermarket. She is friendly, and so you have chatted with her a few times when no one else was in the store. You have learned that she is a single parent with a 7-year-old boy and a 5-year-old girl. Her family lives more than 200 miles away, and so she does not see her parents and sisters often. She is a nurse who works the night shift at the hospital so she can put her kids to bed and have them sleeping while she is at the hospital. Her job at the store is just a way to make a few extra dollars to pay the rent. That is why she looks very tired much of the time.

One morning she asks you if you know anything about some big flood and a guy named Noah. Her son had been playing with friends, who talked about animals on a big boat in a big flood. You tell her that this is a story in the Bible and ask if she knows much about the Bible. She says she does not: She just wondered what her son had been talking about. You suggest she might come to church, and she says rather harshly, “I tried Christianity once. Ten years ago I started going to church. That’s where I met John. But God never helped me. I wound up with two kids and no way to support them. When would I ever have time to do one more thing in my life! I do not have time for one more commitment. And besides, I do not belong there. I would not feel right there. I don’t see any good it would do me at all!”

How would you continue the conversation? What is your longer term strategy for being a Christian friend for Eva?



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