

# **FIRST CLASS:**

## **Module 5**

### **The Gift of Eternal Life: The Soteriological Mystery**

#### **Review of Module 4: Jesus the Christ: The Christological Mystery**

**Here is a summary of the main points of Module 4. If you have any questions and want to dialogue, please contact one of Trinity's pastors!**

- \*The heart and center of the Christian religion is the Person and work of Jesus Christ, who He is and what He has done.**
- \*Christians confess what is revealed in the Word of God, the Bible, that Jesus is both the Lord (ruler) and Savior of the human race and the world.**
- \*Jesus is God. God reveals in the Bible that He is the only true divine Being, an eternal God who is indeed one Being, but, in a statement and reality that is simply beyond human experience and understanding, within His oneness, three distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Second Person of the one true, Triune (a word meaning “three-in-one”) God, the Son of God, was appointed by the Father to carry out and complete the divine plan of rescuing and saving a fallen humanity.**
- \*The first promise of this Good News plan of salvation (“Gospel” is a word in the Bible that means good news) we read in Genesis 3:15, when God promised to our first parents, Adam and Eve, that a baby boy would be born of woman, and that boy would come into the world to defeat Satan and undo the damage he had done (sin and death).**
- \*God fulfilled this promise when Jesus of Nazareth was born. Again, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, came from heaven and by the miraculous action of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, was conceived in the womb of a Jewish virgin named Mary. This miracle is known in Christian vocabulary as the Incarnation. It is a totally unique moment in human history, a one-of-a-kind incident. No human male was involved in this child's conception; it was the Son of God assuming into Himself humanity. The baby Jesus is totally unique in all of humanity—past, present, and future. He is divine. He is deity. He is God. And He is also truly human, beginning life as a zygote, developing in His mother's womb as a fetus, and being born an infant. He is God in human flesh entering human history, living in our space and time here on earth. He has a human ancestry and was a man with body and soul.**

**\*Summarizing His reason for coming to earth, His mission, and His work: He came as a substitute for all humanity. He came to keep the Law and will of God because we could not obey God's law in perfect holiness, as that Law demands of us in order to be connected to God. Jesus lived a full human life, from "cradle to coffin," for some thirty-three years. Never once did he commit a sinful act, speak a sinful word, or even have a single sinful thought or desire. He obeyed God's commandments and will completely, a perfect record.**

**He also gave Himself over to death, actually submitted Himself willfully to a human physical death, but also submitting Himself to the punishment of eternal death. This He did although He was totally innocent of sin, having in His life never sinned, never giving into the temptations of the world culture around Him or the devil. His physical death was by a cruel method of execution, crucifixion in the days of the Roman Empire. He was railroaded, wrongfully accused, unjustly and illegally tried by His own Jewish people, tortured mercilessly, and murdered after intensely suffering. Spiritually He suffered beyond all human imagination. While hanging on the cross, He took upon Himself the full divine wrath and punishment for the sins—all the sins, zillions upon zillions of sins—for all humanity. In other words God the Father let go of all His just anger against all the people who had ever lived before Jesus' birth, all the people alive at the time of Jesus' death, and all the people who would be born in the future. The Father would in that moment totally forsake the Son, so that Jesus would experience in His Person absolute separation from the Father, the totality of punishment for sin, and hell!**

**\*But in His death was amazingly hidden the divine plan of salvation for the human race! His death put to death, death itself! His perfect obedience to His Father's will, even to the cross, was the defeat of Satan and his evil intentions for the end of time.**

**\*And then Jesus was raised in His Body from death itself. Buried in a tomb on the Friday evening on which He died (His time of death was 3:00 p.m.), on early Sunday morning (now celebrated as Easter Sunday) Jesus' soul returned to His corpse there in the tomb, and He was alive again in His Body, the same Body conceived in His mother Mary's womb, the same Body crucified on the cross and buried in the tomb. Over 500 eyewitnesses, people who knew and believed in Jesus when He was carrying out His three-year public ministry, gave the testimony that He was dead, and then was alive again. His resurrection was and continues to be comforting witness that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, therefore His teaching and Word is truth, and that God has accepted His sacrificial death for our benefit!**

In this lesson we will explore another fancy theological word that every Christian should come to know and love: soteriology. It is a word from the ancient Greek word “*soter*,” or “Savior.” Soteriology is the study of salvation. Jesus’ work accomplished our salvation, but how does what He finished two thousand years ago get to us, when each of us are born and live out our lives in our own generation?

Perhaps the best way to get right to the point is to use your Small Catechism, the Explanation, pages 195-204. Read over this whole section and in the space below write any questions or initial observations that “jump out at you:”

Turn back to page 195, and read Martin Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles Creed (inside the box).

**\*What is so profound about Luther’s statement “I believe. . .that I cannot believe?”**

The fact Luther confesses here is based on the Bible’s teaching that, because all human beings are conceived and born in sin—the original sin of Adam and Eve—it is impossible for any human being:

- \*to “find God,” even if he/she seeks earnestly to discover spiritual, religious truth;
- \*to hear the Christian Gospel and decide for herself/himself to become a Christian, to create such faith and belief inside by his/her own will or power; and/or
- \*to in any way or manner cooperate in the Holy Spirit’s work of conversion. (the transformation from being an unbeliever to becoming a believing Christian)

Lutheran Christians, on the basis of the Scripture passages presented in the catechism reading above (John 1:12-13 and 6:65; Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Corinthians 2:14 and 12:3), respectfully disagree with brother and sister Christians from other denominations that teach such “decision theology,” that God brings the Gospel to people, but it is up to the individual to take the final step to conversion. Faith is a creation and gift of God, given freely by Him, and brought to the sinner by the Holy Spirit, solely out of divine love, through the means of the Gospel. Faith is completely God’s work and action. He plants faith, and it is that faith that enables a sinner to believe. Faith as God’s gift precedes conversion, belief, and good works!

Lutheran Christians, on the basis of the Bible, reject the teaching that faith is merely or mostly a human response, avoiding such statements as:

**\*I made my decision to follow Jesus in 1984.**

**\*I found Jesus**

**\*God is my co-pilot**

**The Lutheran Christian altar call is the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion in the Divine Service, topics we will discuss in modules 8 and 10.**

**To illustrate this critical and important difference in understanding how conversion takes place, consider this true story (names have been changed for anonymity):**

**A young lady, 21, grew up in her family's rural Protestant church. She cannot remember a time when her family did not go to church or when she did not know Jesus and believe He was God's Son and her Savior. When she was 13, she made her formal decision for Christ; at an altar call she marched to the front of the church and surrendered and gave her life to Him. Even after graduating from high school and attending the local university, she continued to live an exemplary Christian life.**

**We will name her Sherry. Sherry met a young man, a graduate student, 24, a very decent guy in his own right, a man of good character and personality. However he was not a Christian. His family had no religious background. He was not hostile to Christianity; he just didn't understand how otherwise intelligent people could believe some of the things that Christians taught. We will name him Barry.**

**But Barry was falling in love with Sherry, and, although Sherry knew she would never marry an unbeliever, she was quite smitten with Barry, and continued to date him. They became good friends. As Barry spent more and more time with Sherry's family, he gladly went to church most Sundays with them, and he agreed to read some books Sherry gave him, but to his credit, he would not pretend to believe what he simply could not give himself to accept.**

**Nearly two years into their relationship, Barry joined the family for a week of special, summer revival services. On the last night of these events, the guest evangelist was a missionary/Bible scholar, let's call him the Reverend Doctor Williams. Remember Barry has been to 100 or so church services and sermons, most of them featuring an altar call. In all these opportunities he was never convinced that he could become a Christian. However, the Rev. Dr. Williams began to make sense. As Barry listened it was the first time ever that the story of Jesus actually seemed logical and possible to Barry. It was as if a light bulb went on inside his brain, and a resolution happened in his thought processes. After Dr. Williams finished and invited listeners to come forward and pray to receive Christ, Barry stood. To Sherry and her family's surprise, he made his way down their row of chairs, into the aisle, and up to the altar, where he, along with a half dozen others, prayed with Dr. Williams and other ministers and deacons, and became a believer!**



### **What happened?**

**Well, it is obvious that Barry became a believer in Christ's Person and work. That's what Dr. Williams preached about with clarity and conviction.**

### **How did it happen? When did it happen?**

**Here is where belief and practice differ. Those who teach that human beings must make a decision as the final step of conversion would say that when Barry's will finally stopped resisting the Holy Spirit and turned to Jesus, that he indeed did make a mental, emotional, and spiritual surrender. This change of mind and heart must be accompanied by public profession, so when he went to the altar and there gave himself to Christ, God then accepted him, and the conversion was complete.**

**Those who, like Lutheran Christians, teach that we are saved by grace through the gift of faith, and not of our own decisions, wills, and works, believe that all glory goes to the Holy Spirit, who came again and again through His Word to Barry, who previously made the only decision a sinner can make—to reject God and His Word. But out of love for Barry (and in answer to Sherry and her family's continued prayers for Barry), in His own time, the Holy Spirit chose this day, this preacher, and this service to give to Barry the gift of faith, which would enable even an intellectual skeptic like him, to believe in Christ and His Word. The planting of faith through the means of the Gospel is an act of the Holy Spirit, obviously invisible to us human beings. But the gift was given to Barry, and then he was enabled to believe what he was hearing. He became a Christian when this invisible work of God was done, while he was still sitting in his seat, listening to the sermon.**

**Nitpicky? Perhaps from our viewpoint. Regardless of how faithful people understand the Word of God, the Holy Spirit still saves wherever Christ is preached as the true Son of God, whose death is the salvation of sinners.**

**But if the Bible (God's own Word) clearly teaches that not only do we not, but we cannot cooperate in the work of conversion, should not all glory go to God for His gracious and merciful love to us?**

**A few more questions.**

**We've said much in this story about the Holy Spirit. Who is the Holy Spirit?**

**What is the special role and work the Holy Spirit carries out in the mission of Jesus that continues on in every generation?**

**In this whole matter of salvation who does God want to be saved among the masses of human beings that live on earth in every generation?**

**Why do not all people who hear the Gospel believe?**

**Why are not all people, in the end, going to be in heaven?**

**What would you say to someone who is not a Christian who tells you, "it's okay, I am a very spiritual person?" How might you be a faithful witness to Christ to such a person?**

**What is the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification?**

**What is a "Christian good work?"**

**Return your answers on this module to**

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**If you want to ask questions or enter into dialogue on any of the above questions or related issues, we'd love to engage in conversation with you:**

**[wmarler@trinitylutheranspfd.org](mailto:wmarler@trinitylutheranspfd.org) 417-866-5878 (ask for one of our pastors)**