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## A Study Guide for "The Soteriological Approach to Christian Doctrine"

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# A Study Guide for "The Soteriological Approach to Christian Doctrine"

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Each of the six lessons is divided into four parts. The first part is the *assignment* for the session. It is planned that each participant in the course will familiarize himself with the available materials.<sup>1</sup>

The second part of the lesson is an *Introduction*. We have tried to introduce each lesson with a reference to one of the Propers for the day; in this we have used the standard historic pericopes. With this device we hope that you will be encouraged to incorporate this "New Year's" study as a part of the church's year.

*Input Resources* form the third part of each lesson. These are questions to be used in group discussion. The aim of these questions is to help each member of the group to "dig into the text" and get as much out of the readings as possible.

The fourth part, *Output Resources*, is designed to help the group make concrete applications of the materials in their own life and in the life of the congregation. Each Input Resource has a corresponding Output Resource.

<sup>1</sup> The study guide is designed to be used with the entire section of Mayer's book dealing with the soteriological approach. This includes some material in lessons 3 and 5 not included in this reprint. We have included the page numbers of those materials in Mayer (according to the 1961 edition) so that those who have access to the full volume may use it. Furthermore, those questions dealing with these materials are marked with an \*. We have attempted to construct these questions in such a way that discussion can take place even if all members of the class do not have access to the complete volume.

For example, Output Resource 3 attempts to make practical applications of the materials discussed in Input Resource 3.

## LESSON 1: TALKING ABOUT GOD AND MAN

*Reading:* pp. 343-348.

### *Introduction*

*And going into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. (Matt. 2:11. from the Gospel for the Epiphany of Our Lord)*

It is quite a curious scene which Matthew portrays for us. Important dignitaries, kings from the East, enter the house of a commoner after a tedious search. They fall on their faces and worship a child! The inquisitive person will wonder what is going on. Why do kings search for children? Why do dignitaries worship babies?

Such questions are the beginnings of theology. Theology, literally, is the science of God-talk. The Christian, because of his beliefs, must always talk about the man Jesus Christ when he talks about God; man-talk and God-talk are inseparable for the follower of the God-man Jesus Christ. That's where Lutheran theology must always begin—with Jesus—and that is where it will always lead.

### *Input Resources*

1. What makes it difficult to talk about God? Can you talk about God the same way you would talk about, say, the weather or the stock market? Why or why not? Try to



list all the places where you meet God. How does the meeting take place in each? In what ways does Jesus Christ make it easier to talk about God? In what ways does He make it harder?

2. Mayer uses the term "wrath of God." What do you think it means? React to this:

Man suddenly falls to pieces. Dread takes hold of him. Of what? . . . It is the dread one has when in the night suddenly two demonic eyes stare at him—eyes which paralyze him into immobility and fill him with the certainty that these are the eyes of him who will kill you in this very hour. . . . God has suddenly become a Person who calls to me personally. And this person calls to me to tell me that my time has run out.<sup>2</sup>

Do you think Jesus ever felt this wrath of God? Do you think Luther ever did? Give examples. Have you ever had a feeling like this?

3. What does God think about people? What does God think about you? How do you know? Do you ever *feel* what you *know* about God's feelings?
4. Lutherans talk about sin as much as they talk about sins. What is the difference? Tell how sin is similar to and different from:
  - a. a mistake.
  - b. a weakness.
  - c. cancer.
  - d. death.
5. When a person is "saved" by faith in Jesus Christ, what gets saved? What does Mayer have to say about this?

#### *Output Resources*

1. Lutherans say that you cannot really talk about God unless you talk about Jesus Christ. In our personal religious life and in our talking to

other people, how much do we merely speculate about God, and how much do we talk about Jesus Christ? Where can we "beef up" our God-talk with more talk about Jesus?

2. Many people think of God as a kind old grandfather. What does that do to God's wrath? Why don't people pay attention to God's anger with sin? How do we best communicate God's feelings about people?
3. How do God's feelings about you and others shape the way you feel about yourself and those around you?
4. Can we talk about sin without talking about sins? Do we keep sin and sins balanced? Where do we need to correct deficiencies in our sin-talk?
5. If God saves the whole person, what does this say about how Christians value human life? Try to find hymns that talk about the value of life on earth. Find some hymns that seem not to value life.

#### LESSON 2: ENTER JESUS CHRIST

*Reading:* pp. 348-354.

#### *Introduction*

*After three days they found Him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. (Luke 2:46-47, from the Gospel for the First Sunday After Epiphany)*

Luke seems interested in helping us to "keep the epiphany going." He shows us the boy Jesus, only 12 years old and yet already keenly interested in doing the work of the Father.

We have begun a very difficult task. We want to sort through the intricate and seemingly impossible maze of language about God to hear once again what God would say to us about Himself and about our humanity. That is an immense undertaking, but it is homework which *must* go on within

<sup>2</sup> Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 20.



the church. Perhaps God will bless that work and permit us to discover again among the debates of rabbi and scholar the figure of Jesus Christ at work about His Father's business.

### *Input Resources*

1. What is so important about Jesus Christ? Try to say it in one simple sentence. Did you mention something about the cross, the forgiveness of sins, or salvation? If you did, chances are you were dealing in *soteriology*. Soteriology is "talk about salvation through Jesus Christ." Try to state Mayer's main point at the beginning of this article in your own words.
2. What does it mean to say, "To know Christ is to know and accept His benefits"? As far as Lutherans are concerned, is it enough to know the *facts* about Jesus Christ? Does that make a person a Christian? If not, what more is needed?
3. Why do Lutherans talk so much about the natures of Christ (true God and true man)? From a soteriological viewpoint, why must Jesus be true God? Why true man? Throughout the history of the church there have been tendencies incorrectly to ignore either Jesus' Godhood or His manhood. Which tendency do you think is more of a danger in modern American Lutheranism? (Be sure to look at *A Study of Generations*, by Merton P. Strommen; you might be surprised!)
4. Why do Lutherans seem to constantly "downgrade" themselves ("Man does not help along in his conversion." "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ. . . .")? Do they do it to make themselves feel bad? Or is there another reason?
5. Evaluate these charges:
  - a. Lutherans ignore good works. (What does *Study of Generations* report about this?)

b. Lutherans think that faith is knowledge, that is, knowing what Jesus did.

Are these charges true? What elements of our tradition "lead" people to charge us in this way?

### *Output Resources*

1. Is the death of Jesus Christ and the salvation that comes through Him the center of our life together as a community of God's people? Is it the center of every sermon, the reason for our celebrating, the common ground of our fellowship? How can we keep the death and resurrection of Christ at the center of our lives? at the center of the church?
2. Do we just know *about* Christ, or do we try also to know His benefits? Evaluate your programs of Christian education from this perspective. What are you looking for: knowledge, right answers, or something else?
3. If your group has decided that there has been a lack of emphasis in talking about either Jesus' Godhood or His manhood, how can it be corrected? Think of some Bible stories that would help to correct it, but that we have sometimes "ignored."
4. The church is sometimes necessarily involved in "putting people down," in downgrading, in announcing God's anger with sin. When we are involved in such activities, are we doing so to build up our praise of Jesus Christ, or do we have other motives at times? What might they be? How do you honestly feel when you reprimand your child or "lay down the law" to a neighbor?
5. Have we sometimes misrepresented our traditions and thus *invited* unfair criticism? If so, how can we more accurately proclaim our beliefs?



### LESSON 3: TURNABOUT

*Reading:* pp. 354-356. (Mayer, pp. 160-169: "Conversion" and "The Means of Grace")

#### *Introduction*

. . . *the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine. . .* (John 2:9, from the Gospel for the Second Sunday After Epiphany)

Something happened. John called it a sign, and by that he meant that Jesus' action pointed to something. It wasn't just a parlor trick, nor was it simply miraculous. It was a sign, and it says something to John's readers: The water of purification has become the wine of the New Age. Once upon a time, John would tell us, you tried to "wash" yourselves clean by keeping the Law, but this is a New Age. Come, make yourselves clean by tasting the new wine of Jesus, the wine which is His own lifeblood poured out for your sins.

To be a child of God means that we have been involved in a miraculous change. Once we were enemies of God, making excuses and making war. God has turned us about to see His love in the death of His Son, and that changes us. "Come taste and see that the Lord is good. . . ."

#### *Input Resources*

- \*1. What is converted in conversion? What part does a person play in his own conversion?
- \*2. Are people naturally religious? Explain your answer. How does the world understand religion? How is that different from Lutheranism?
3. What exactly is the Gospel? Can the Gospel be communicated only with words? with actions? with actions and words? Give examples. What does the Gospel do to people? How can the Gospel do it?
- \*4. If a Christian has the Word of God, why does he also need sacraments? How do the sacraments

"amplify" the Gospel?

- \*5. The sacraments are a way both to reach back into the past (to come into a living contact with Jesus Christ) and also to reach into the future (to claim God's promises for us here and now). Discuss how Baptism and the Lord's Supper do both of these things. (Look at Rom. 6:4 and 1 Cor. 11:26.)
- \*6. What gives the sacraments their power? Does everyone receive the same blessings through the sacraments? Why or why not?

#### *Output Resources*

- \*1. What difference does conversion make in your life? What is different as a result of your new relationship to God? Is it good news or bad news for you to know that you can do nothing on your own to turn yourself toward God? Explain.
- \*2. Should the church use a person's natural understanding of religion as a starting point for introducing the Christian faith to him? People often describe their faith by saying, "Yes, I believe in God." Is that really faith? In what ways might it be? Try to evaluate what part natural notions of religion have played in your own understandings and in the life of the church.
3. When do words *about* Jesus become the Gospel? How can your Jesus-talk become more Gospel-oriented? Can you make use of actions to proclaim the Gospel? How? In what ways is your congregation trying to communicate the Gospel concretely through actions?
- \*4. In what ways are the sacraments emphasized in your congregation? In what ways could they be better emphasized?
- \*5. React to this statement made by another Christian: "Sometimes I feel my faith is weakened because I have no possible way of even



meeting Jesus Christ; after all, He lived nearly 2,000 years ago and nobody knows when He's coming back." How could the sacraments be an answer to this person's dilemma?

- \*6. Evaluate these two statements:
- Don't talk to me about *my* faith! I'm a baptized Christian!
  - As long as a person attends the Lord's Supper four times a year, his faith will remain strong.

#### LESSON 4: SPEAKING AND LIVING THE NEW LIFE

*Reading:* pp. 356-362.

##### *Introduction*

*I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against Me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against Me. And this city . . . shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it. (Jer. 33:8-9, from the Old Testament lesson for the Third Sunday After Epiphany)*

The prophet Jeremiah knew the twofold character of God and of the Word which God speaks. He knew the word of judgment, and he could feel the heat of God's wrath as through the Chaldeans the city was filled with "dead bodies of men whom I shall smite in My anger and My wrath, for I have hidden My face from this city because of all their wickedness" (33:5). But Jeremiah knew the other word too—the word of promise and hope and forgiveness. The two words, the word of wrath and the word of forgiveness, stand in stubborn contradiction to each other. Each is real, and each must be heard as part of God's message to man.

In the past lessons we have tried to demonstrate how Lutherans shape their God-talk and man-talk in such

a way so that they can hear *both* words of God. Today we will try to analyze the separation of those two words and also suggest the nature of man's new responsibility before God through his new relationship in Jesus Christ.

##### *Input Resources*

- We have defined Gospel. Now try to define Law. How does Mayer use the term? Is there any similarity in the way that Lutherans talk about Law as distinct from laws, and sin as distinct from sins? How are Law and sin related? (Look at Rom. 7:7-12.) In what way is the Law "bad news"? Does that mean that the Law is bad?
- What happens if people hear nothing but Law? What can happen if the Law is never preached?
- How many functions of the Law does Mayer recognize? What are they? There has been much debate among Lutherans about the "third use of the Law." How does Mayer define the "third use"? If the Confessions talk about a "third use," why does Mayer only talk about two functions of the Law? Does Mayer ignore the third use?
- What do you think is meant by the phrase, "They'll know we are Christians by our love"? In what ways *should* that be true? In what ways *is* it true? In what ways could that phrase lead to a "confusion of Law and Gospel"?
- What is a "good work"? Can a non-Christian do a "good work"? Are the good works that Christians perform different from the good deeds of non-Christians? If so, how?

##### *Output Resources*

- Where is it that you expect to hear Law? Consider Matt. 25:31-46 from this perspective.
- When in your own life do you need to hear Law? When do you need to speak Law?



3. Which function of the Law is more important in relation to the Gospel, that is, which function drives people to rely on God's grace in Jesus Christ? Try to analyze how Law was used in the last sermon you heard. Did it push you to the Gospel?
4. Will people know you are Christian just by what you do? Do you have to tell them anything? How can you make your actions and your verbal witness fit together more effectively?
5. Keeping in mind numbers 4 and 5 from the Input Resources, react to Mayer's statement, "Lutheran theology has no 'system of ethics' in the usually accepted definition of the term." What opportunities are open for you to do "good works" at home, at school, on the job? React to this statement: "We are Christians as we live in the world. We *celebrate* that fact in church."

## LESSON 5: TRANSFIGURED EXISTENCE

*Reading:* Mayer, pp. 176-182 ("The Church and Ministry," "The Christian and Civil Government," "Eschatology," and "Cultus and Polity")

### *Introduction*

*And He was transfigured before them. . . .*  
 (Matt. 17:2, from the Gospel for the Transfiguration of Our Lord)

Some have described the Transfiguration of Jesus as an "Aha!" experience, a sudden insight into the real nature and identity of the God-man. As such, the end of the Epiphany season is a good time to celebrate this event. Here is the epiphany *par excellence*, one that anticipates the full disclosure of God's greatest "Aha!" of

goodness and grace on Easter morning.

That makes this a good time to consider the variety of topics which are a part of today's assignment. At first glance they might seem to have little in common. But today's festival might help us to find the thread which connects them all: The new age of God's grace in Jesus Christ has transformed existence in this world. The Christian lives under the epiphany that "this old world" is about to come to an end as God's new kingdom—even today!—breaks in upon us.

### *Input Resources*

- \*1. Mayer describes both the church and government from an *eschatological* perspective. Eschatology is "talk about the end of things." Perhaps you can get a "feel" for the issues in eschatology by trying to answer these questions: When does the kingdom of God come? Did it come with Jesus Christ, or are we still waiting for it, or is it somehow here already and yet still coming at the same time? Explain your answer.
- \*2. Review the Lutheran definition of "church" (AC VII and VIII). Is that the way in which you think of a church? How is it similar? How is it different?
- \*3. What do you think happens "when the holy Christian church is confounded with a specific external organization" (Mayer, p. 177)? Is this an overemphasis of the "already" or the "not yet"? Explain.
- \*4. Could there be such a thing as a "Christian government"? Can a government run on the principle *sola gratia* (grace alone)? Explain your answer.
- \*5. What is the function of liturgy? Is there "soteriological significance" in the liturgy?

### *Output Resources*

- \*1. Eschatology is a source of great hope for the church. How is the



"already" good news? How is the "not yet" good news?

- \*2. Is the definition of "church" destroyed by the presence of hypocrites among the faithful? Discuss the implication of Jesus' parable of the Weeds in the Wheat from this perspective (Matt. 13:24-30).
- \*3. Have we ever been guilty of "confounding the holy Christian church with a specific external organization"? If so, in what ways? How can such abuses be corrected?
- \*4. In what ways does your congregation operate on the principle of *sola gratia*? In what ways does it operate as a government? Is the line between the two always easily defined? Where might the line need redefining?
- \*5. How could you give your liturgy more soteriological significance?

**Input Resources**

1. What does Mayer mean when he says that Scripture alone is the source of doctrine? Is the Bible a textbook on theology? If not, how is it different? In what ways could one say that the Biblical writers "seem to be Lutheran"? In what ways would it be difficult to say that?
2. According to Mayer, why does a Lutheran accept the authority of the Word of God? What gives the Word of God its power?
3. How is Christ the center of Scripture? How is He the center of the Lutheran understanding of Scripture?
4. If both the Lutherans and their Roman opponents accepted the authority of Scripture, why then were there disagreements? Did the disagreement have more to do with the "source of doctrine" or with the "central thought"?

**LESSON 6: THE GOAL OF THEOLOGY**

*Reading:* pp. 362-365.

**Introduction**

*I do not run aimlessly. . . .* (1 Cor. 9:26, from the Epistle for Septuagesima Sunday)

St. Paul used the image of a race to describe the Christian life to the Corinthians. That is an especially appropriate image to keep in mind now as we begin to prepare for Lent. As we "race" through the church's year of grace, where are we headed? As we aim for Good Friday and Easter, what is our goal?

The same question ought to be asked as we conclude our study of Lutheran doctrine. Why all the work? Why all the fine distinctions and definitions? The Lutheran answer to those questions, as Mayer reminds us, is Jesus Christ. He is the beginning and the end of the theological task. If we keep Him as our only goal, we will never

**Output Resources**

1. Where does theology come from? Would a 20th-century person talk differently about God and man than a 16th-century person might? What makes a theology true to the principle *sola Scriptura*?
2. How does a pastor rely on the power of God's Word as he preaches? How do you rely on that power?
3. What is the correct use of Scripture? Is there such a thing as an incorrect use of Scripture? If so, name some examples of ways in which Scripture is misused today.
4. How can the church today know whether a person is reading the Bible correctly? What implications does this have for the identification and resolution of doctrinal disputes within the church?