

## **The Shack**

### **Foreword**

#### Credibility

- how do we establish credibility?
- How has the story teller set up the credibility of the main character?

These two men seem to have an effective small group ministry with one another. They share intimate details of their life together.

Mack's father and co worker helped to turn him from faith?

Can you understand this?

Mack was 13 when he turned his problem to someone at church

How can we take to heart the concerns of youth?

Yet even with this background Mack would up in seminary.

Mack is described as an everyday guy – who works from home – nothing special. Maybe just like us. He likes to talk about God but is still not too religious. He is said to have a love/hate relationship with religion and God.

The author says this: I know that grace rarely makes sense for those looking in from the outside. What does that mean to you?

God comes to us in the ordinary, in word, water, bread and wine.

God comes to the ordinary.

God is extraordinarily in love with the ordinary.

Do you see yourself in any of the descriptions of this ordinary human being?

## **Chapter 1 - A confluence of paths**

Mack and the rest of us have commitments, expectations, performance demands, appointments and schedules.

How do we deal with things that get us off schedule?

How do we see Christ in the interruptions of life?

We are reminded that we all feel like the masters of our own world. Are we?

The storm was an obstacle to life for Mack. Ice and snow caused his routine to change and presented a challenge to the simple tasks of life.

What are the ice and snow in your life?

Can they bring invitation to be with God?

Isaiah 55 1-13 is an invitation. How do hear Isaiah in light of the invitation Mack received. Is this a similar invitation.

The call story of Moses: in Exodus 3: 1-15

How is Moses like Mack?

Mack tried to verify that the mailman brought the letter.

How do we try and verify what we hear God calling us to do? Romans 12: 1-2

1 Cor 1: 10-18, 26-31 and chapter 2; John 5:30

Mack and his wife Nan check in with each other and they talk about a problem with their daughter Kate. We don't know what the problem is but it seems to be a relational problem one that Nan has turn over to God in prayer.

Nan talks about her doubt that God hasn't heard her prayer or at least hasn't responded to her prayer.

Look at Luke 18:2-5 – What is Jesus telling us about perseverance in prayer? Remember God is not the judge in this story. Continue to read vs 7-8.

Bill Hybels in his book, Too Busy not to Pray, says we are not the widow, she has no relationship with the judge. We are adopted children of God and we matter to God. The judge was unrighteous and our God is righteous. This parable is a study in opposites. God wants to be in relationship with us and God hears us.

Hybels also reminds us that Jesus taught us to call God Father, actually papa (Abba).

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

Can you see that Nan's prayers were beginning to be answered and she didn't know it.

Mack says it will work out, but does he mean it. Do we say what we think others want to hear?

It sounds like Nan has faith and trust. She just wants God to hurry.

We pray – thy will be done ---- do we mean that?

Look at Psalm 90:13-17 doesn't this sound like Nan, like us?

Reminds me of the following song lyrics

## You Can't Hurry God

Copyright 1989 Darlene Osborne  
(All Rights Reserved)

I've been needing some answers  
For so long  
It seems to get harder  
As time goes on  
But I know Jesus loves me  
I can feel His touch  
Though I get in a hurry  
God won't be rushed

Chorus:

Cause you can't hurry God  
No, you can't hurry God  
I find, you can't hurry God  
But He will be on time

When I get into trouble  
I go to Jesus in prayer  
I know that He's with me  
Cause I can feel Him everywhere  
He don't get in a hurry  
But He's always on time  
When I start getting worried  
This thought comes to my mind  
(Repeat Chorus)

Lesson 2            The Shack

The Gathering Dark – Chapter 2

The great sadness Mack feels is the loss of a daughter.

We all experience loss and reading of Mack's loss is hard. It brings home memories of our losses.

Great sadness usually comes as a result of great love.

There is great love within this family and great tradition.

They tell the story of sacrifice and salvation in the tale of the Indian princess.

Did you hear echoes of Jesus in the tale?

The family settles down to a meal and Mack is profoundly touched by a feeling of great joy.

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24 tells us how to live in Christian love and fellowship. Can you hear Mack's life to this point in this passage?

Mack feels God's presence in nature and can almost hear hymns break out. Have you ever felt this way? Where?

Missy is being tucked in to bed and she begins to ask questions about the legend of the Indian Princess. She asks why she had to die?

Then she asks – was Jesus' sacrifice a legend?

We all have doubts? When do you doubt? How can we know the truth of Jesus?

Missy and Mack enter into the dialogue of the great spirit and if that is another name for God the Father, Papa.

How do you understand God? We say we believe in one God? Is Allah the same one God as our God?

Missy asks the grand 6 year old's question – will God make me jump off the cliff to prove my love?

What does God make us do to achieve salvation?

How would you answer Missy's question?

After this tough encounter with Missy – Mack ends his day in thanksgiving and prayer.

How do you end your day?

How important is prayer in your life?



## Lesson 4     The Shack

Chapter 4 is the story of the death Missy. The Great Sadness sets in at the realization that Missy is dead.

Mack begins to play the what if game.

What if I hadn't taken the kids camping?

What if my wife had been here to help?

What if if if?

We play the what if game too. Lots of life is about what if.

How do we discount God when we play what if?

Mack begins to run from God or at least discount and ignore God. He is separating himself from God because he feels God has failed him.

Have you ever felt this way?

Do you understand that sin is separation from God?

Mack certainly beats himself up for not being there for Missy, but was Missy's loss something Mack could control?

Even as Mack finds himself removed from God, he still has hope that God is talking to him, calling him to a meeting.

But does God write notes?

Does God interact with us today?

How do we see and understand God with us?

Think about what it means to be the Body of Christ for the world.

Are we the visible manifestation of God today?

How else is God made manifest for us?

Mack said he learned in seminary that God had stopped overt communication with moderns. He says God's voice had been reduced to paper.

Mack lashes out at "social religion" and the church. Mack is God for letting Missy die and Mack has separated himself from God.

The note and invitation to the shack is blatant and overt. Would or could God be so obvious in God's communication with us in reality?

Have you experienced God present, visible, or vocal in your life? How?

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

From GotQuestions. Org (<http://www.gotquestions.org/God-still-speak.html>)

God does speak to people today. First, God speaks to us through His Word ([2 Timothy 3:16-17](#)). [Isaiah 55:11](#) tells us, “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” The Bible records God’s words to us in everything we need to know in order to be saved and live the Christian life. [2 Peter 1:3-4](#) declares, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

Secondly, God speaks through impressions, events, and thoughts. God helps us to discern right from wrong through our consciences ([1 Timothy 1:5](#); [1 Peter 3:16](#)). God is in the process of conforming our minds to think His thoughts ([Romans 12:2](#)). God allows events to occur in our lives to direct us, change us, and help us to grow spiritually ([James 1:2-5](#); [Hebrews 12:5-11](#)). [1 Peter 1:6-7](#) reminds us, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

Finally, yes, God likely does sometimes speak audibly to people. It is highly doubtful, though, that this occurs as often as some people claim it does. Again, even in the Bible, God speaking audibly is the exception, not the ordinary. If anyone claims that God has spoken to him/her, always compare what is said with what the Bible says. If God were to speak today, His words would be in full agreement with what He has said in the Bible. God does not contradict Himself. [2 Timothy 3:16-17](#) proclaims, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

## Lesson 5 The Shack

Pg 67

“There are times when you choose to believe something that would normally be considered absolutely irrational. It doesn't mean that it is *actually* irrational, but it surely is not rational.”

How does faith fit in to our bigger picture of rationality?

Books like Lee Stroebel's –“A Case for Christ” or “A Case for Faith” Or “Letters from a Skeptic” by Boyd try and prove faith rationally. Other books like “Misquoting Jesus” by Ehrman try to disprove the existence of God and the need for faith.

Can we prove that God is alive and well and living in our lives?

The note: It was from God, a cruel joke, or something sinister from Missy's killer.

Mack somehow feels there is rightness to his decision to go. How could the Spirit be leading him. How do we understand the Holy Spirit with us to strengthen us and guide us? Do we inhibit the work of the Spirit?

Everything seems to fall into place (pg 68-69) yet Mack's friend Willie worries about him and senses Mack is going to the Shack.

What's going on here?

(p.69) Mack thought he wouldn't need anything if God sent the invite but just in case he prepares. How do we prepare for the journey? What's our preparation for an encounter with God?

Mack shares the note with Willie? What do you think of the dialogue they have?

Willie says – God doesn't do stuff like this? At least not that he has heard of. I heard someone say once that the Bible and Jesus are one big love letter from God to each and every one of us. Is the writing in the Bible a personal communication for you? (pg 71) “Mack says Willie, I guess part of me would like to believe that God would care enough about me to send a note.” What about you?

Mack's friend Willie offers to go with him. I'm not sure that if I were Mack I wouldn't have taken him up on the offer. This is a scary trip. So Willie offers the next best thing – a gun.

*"God didn't make all men equal -- Colonel Colt did."*

*"When all else fails, get a bigger gun"*

*A kind word and a gun will get you further than just a kind word.*

*"Never start a fight with seven men if you only have a six-shooter."*

*Know guns, know peace and safety. No guns, no peace nor safety.*



Mack takes the gun anyway. What do we take with us anyway – when we go to encounter God? Trust?

Mack admits to not telling Nan. He says he didn't really lie? He just didn't tell her. Willie knows what a great relationship they have and can't believe Mack is doing something so out of character.

When is a little lie okay?

Willie says well if you see God – what do you think God looks like.

What does God look like?

Page 74

Mack is not sure about this trip and his stomach is acting up - he is so upset he becomes sick and calls out for help. When we are anxious, worried about whether we are doing the right thing, how do we react?

Mack reaches back for the gun – self reliant in a situation of fear.

This sounds like the people of Israel in Isaiah. God says why do you trust the other nations to save you, trust in me.

Mack does put the safety on the gun and put it away.

Mack enters the cabin and his eyes find the bloodstain and he laments.

(p78)

Why am I here. He throws a chair. Wasn't it enough to kill my baby? I hate you!

Mack laments and cries out to God and feels the gun in his back. Maybe suicide is the answer? Relief? When is the pain too much?

Yet Mack realizes his life is not his own. What about the rest of the family?

Mack tears up the note and leaves (pg 80)

---

Then as Mack walks away---- The world around Mack changes  
Spring is in bloom, the dark and desolate wood changes to an idyllic country side.

Mack is sure he is losing his mind.

He turns back and once on the porch hears voices (pg82)

How does intimate contact with God change our perspective of the world?

Mack confronts God – a large African American woman who is screaming his full name.

Now, when someone is calling me by my full name I am usually in trouble – how about you? What would be going through your mind. God is a man isn't he???? No – God is whatever God wants to be.

God proclaims love for Mack and Mack said all normal conventions of society were out the window. (p.83)

Have you ever read Song of Songs. – This book has been seen as a love song from God to God's people, an intimate, passionate love song. God loves us passionately, spiritually, paternally, maternally, in every way.

God takes the gun from Mack and as God turns to enter the cabin the Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman and collects Mack's tears. This seems an odd thing to collect. What was your impression of what was happening?

What did you think of the shimmering – out of focus description of the Spirit?

Mack then encounters Jesus – a Middle Eastern – work a day kind of guy.

Mack doesn't quite get it – he sees 3 and wonders are there more.

No God says just us and then they each encounter Mack and he is lifted up and overwhelmed.

Then God takes the initiative and says let us introduce ourselves.

God is Elousia

El = the generic Semitic name of God or deity found as a common name for God in the Hebrew bible. It signifies mysterious divine power. El was worshiped in Canaanite religions as a high god and father of Baal, the fertility god. El is used as a synonym for YHWH and combined into other forms. El אֱלֹהִים; Elohim אֱלֹהִים; El Shaddai אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי; Emmanuel; El-Olam אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם; El Berith אֱלֹהֵי בְרִית .

Ousia – Greek for being (God is the verb to be יהוה ) or substance. A key philosophical and theological term used at the Council of Nicaea in 325CE to indicate that the Son, Jesus Christ, is of the same essence or substance as God the Father. Later the same was said of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

Jesus and the Spirit are introduced as well and the Spirit's name is Sarayu or wind.

The Greek word for Spirit is wind or pneuma. Thus the trinity is identified and acknowledges, when asked, that all three are God.

## Lesson 6

The quote from Ellul suggest that God puts limits on God. In other words God is all about our free will and not putting us on puppet strings.

The first words from God to Mack are – come talk (invitation)

Help me

Or do what you want (fishing?)

Free will

### **Article XVIII: Of Free Will.**

1] Of Free Will they teach that man's will has some liberty to choose civil righteousness, and to work 2] things subject to reason. But it has no power, without the Holy Ghost, to work the righteousness of God, that is, spiritual righteousness; since the natural man 3] receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, **1 Cor. 2:14**; but this righteousness is wrought in the heart when the Holy Ghost is received 4] through the Word. These things are said in as many words by Augustine in his Hypognosticon, Book III: We grant that all men have a free will, free, inasmuch as it has the judgment of reason; not that it is thereby capable, without God, either to begin, or, at least, to complete aught in things pertaining to God, but only in works of this life, whether good 5] or evil. "Good" I call those works which spring from the good in nature, such as, willing to labor in the field, to eat and drink, to have a friend, to clothe oneself, to build a house, to marry a wife, to raise cattle, to learn divers useful arts, or whatsoever good 6] pertains to this life. For all of these things are not without dependence on the providence of God; yea, of Him and through Him they are and have their being. "Evil" 7] I call such works as willing to worship an idol, to commit murder, etc. 8] They condemn the Pelagians and others, who teach that without the Holy Ghost, by the power of nature alone, we are able to love God above all things; also to do the commandments of God as touching "the substance of the act." For, although nature is able in a manner to do the outward work, 9] (for it is able to keep the hands from theft and murder,) yet it cannot produce the inward motions, such as the fear of God, trust in God, chastity, patience, etc.

We have free will but it is God that gives us the power to understand God.

Jesus and Mack have a conversation – Mack says I feel obligated to go and talk to God. Jesus says don't feel obligated.

Do we feel obligated to talk to God – are we obligated to go to worship, to pray? We have the free will to worship, to pray, we are not required. That doesn't mean God doesn't like us to do these things, but that God does not demand it.

Jumping ahead a little but still on the subject of free will.

Mack asks on p. 94 you knew I would come. – then was I free not to come. Did I have a choice - God says how deep do you want to go.

After some discussion on p95 – God says freedom is an incremental process. The Truth will set you free and the Truth has a name – Jesus.

Jesus is the way the Truth and the life. Where there is truth there is Jesus.

Mack almost let's his anger boil out (p.90) but shoves it back. Do we keep things locked away from God? God is listening to not yet created funk. God is and was and will be. God's name is I Am. God says I listen to everything not just the music but the heart behind it? Wow – God listens to everything – I'm in trouble how about you?

The conversation on p. 91 relates to Mack calling God Papa and not just because she is in the form of a woman. This goes back to our discussion of God's name in Lesson 2.

God offers to be Mack's Papa but Mack wonders how that can be when God didn't protect Missy. About Missy – God says I'm so sorry. Tears roll down her cheeks.

This is too hard and Mack says I don't know how you can heal the divide between us.

God says no magic fix --- life take a bit of time and a lot of relationship.

God says getting head stuff out of the way makes the heart stuff easier to work on later. Do we try to rationalize God – analyze God? How can we get beyond the head stuff?

p.93 I am neither male nor female. We get all wrapped up in images of God – how do you picture God? God comes to Mack as something other than father, because Mack couldn't handle that.

God provides what we need – do you believe that?

P 94 there is an emphasis on fathering because of the enormity of its absence. --- Is that true?

Mack and God talk about how God can know what Mack feels. Mack and Papa are holding hands and Mack see Jesus' scars on God's hands. We know that everything God is Jesus is and everything Jesus is God is, and everything they are the Holy Spirit is and they are everything the Holy Spirit is.

Jesus on the cross was abandoned – Mack felt abandoned – Mack is sure Missy was abandoned by God. God says don't be so sure.

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

When all you can see is your pain – you lose sight of me.

How do you understand this?

The discussion moves to the nature of God.

P 98 God says – some take the best version of themselves and project it to the nth degree and call that God. Papa says that falls short.

God begins to describe creation and the nature of God. Papa says sin entered into the mix and messed up my plan. Jesus chose to limit himself to create right relationships with humanity. The healing power of Jesus is his full humanity not his divinity. Humankind was created in the image of God - Luther talked about the miracles of God being seen in the ordinary and not in the extraordinary. He talked about God's creation being good and perfect and in the perfection of Jesus we see what could have been and is in Jesus. P. 100

Some of this is mystery – p.101 – who wants to worship a God you can fully comprehend.

Let's discuss the trinity – 3 persons – 3 attitudes – 3 ways of being.

No earthly description is sufficient. We try and wrap our heads around the incomprehensible. Ultimately God is love. P102 – God is love – God needs love – God needs someone to love. God wanted to share that relationship with creation and still does. Relationships take time. How much time – God always says as long as it takes.

The book moves toward a pause but first Mack says – I'm sorry Jesus had to die. The response is Jesus' death was not just for you but it was also all for you.

How can you understand that in your life?

## Lesson 7

### God on the Dock

Mack begins to observe the relationship between God's three persons.

God jokes about the spilling of the batter and in the aftermath of a mess Mack observes what is important – the love the 3 shared and the fullness it brought them.

There was no pointing of fingers, no yelling, no turmoil, only loving, sharing unity of purpose.

p. 106      God talks about what we share with one of the persons of God we share with all and also says that in this encounter with Mack, God is choosing to limit God's self to further develop relationship.

What do you think of this concept, a self limiting God? Isn't that what God did in Jesus?

Sarayu says: "relationships are never about power and one way to avoid the will to power is to choose to limit oneself – to serve" What a beautiful understanding of the servant heart.

How do you maintain a servant heart – a servant attitude? Jesus came to serve not to be served and we are called to a life of service in response to God's saving grace.

Papa says lets have a time of devotion and Mack is embarrassed but the three are not. Jesus takes God's hand and talks about the beauty and wonder he saw in God's action that day.

That's devotion and thanksgiving. I wonder do we grasp each other by the hand and look in the eyes of our family and tell them how wonderful we think they are, do we share their gifts, do we acknowledge the joys we share? Or is our time of family devotion centered on a prayer at meal time and thanks only to God?

Mack and Jesus move to the dock

Mack tells Jesus he feels more comfortable around him – Jesus is more real. Surprise – surprise. We know that Jesus is one of us it makes sense that we relate to Jesus on a more connected and intimate level.

The truth of Jesus is that Jesus was incarnate as a particular Jew of the first century CE. Jesus was not the picture of Jesus we see in old Sunday school books, the reality was probably much like the book describes.

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

How do you imagine Jesus?

Jesus says “being always transcends appearances...once you know the being behind the face the appearance no longer matters”.  
Do you think that’s true?

Jesus says he lives in Mack and Mack lives in him. This is Papa’s miracle. It is the power of the Holy Spirit. P.112

**titus 3.5-8** <sup>5</sup>he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. <sup>6</sup>This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup>so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. <sup>8</sup>The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone.

Even at the end of their time together Mack slips into a malaise and tells Jesus he is still lost. Jesus says I am with you and you are not lost. Jesus says I know where I am and if you are with me you cannot be lost.

How do we go to Jesus in times when we feel lost? In Jesus we have hope.



## The Shack Lesson 8

Mack goes to his room to sleep and settles down – begins to read his Bible and falls into a comforting sleep. He dreams as a child.

1 Cor 13: 8ff

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Mack confronted with God sleeps and dreams as a child, yet his dream turns to nightmare as he sees glimpses of his daughter in fear and the great sadness returns.

He says Papa (p117) made him nervous, he didn't know what to make of the Holy Spirit and he liked Jesus a lot because he was the least God like (more human maybe).

We profess that we are to fear, love and honor God  
The Holy Spirit empowers us to understand God - we can't ourselves  
Jesus came to be one of us to share our experience, this is a comfort.

Mack is a little overwhelmed as I think we all are in the presence of God.

Yet, everything Mack needs for life and comfort is provided. This amuses him.

But this is a reminder for us that God provides our need.

How do you understand that statement?

Don't you love the way God continually says "I am especially fond" of someone.

God is especially fond of each one of us. God claims us – chooses us and we need to be reminded of our uniqueness and "specialness" in God's eyes. (p118)

Dreams – God says dreams are important – they can be a way to let the bad air out.

The following is taken from the ELCA website

The human journey toward abundant life demands that we seek balance and wholeness, and our dreams can be an important part of this effort.

*by Stephen Martz*

King Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a magnificent “tree at the center of the earth.” It is “great and strong” and “from it all living things were fed.” Suddenly, a “holy watcher, coming down from heaven,” cries out: “Cut down the tree and chop off its branches, strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit” (Daniel 4).

Earlier in the Bible, Pharaoh dreams of seven “fat and sleek cows” emerging from the Nile only to be eaten by “seven other cows” that “came up after them” and were “poor, very ugly, and thin” (Genesis 41).

If one of these dreams had been yours, would you know what to make of it? Neither of these ancient dreamers, great and accomplished though they were, could get a handle on his dream, and both turned to interpreters—Nebuchadnezzar to Daniel, Pharaoh to Joseph—to gain understanding.

Experiencing a connection between their inner and outer lives, our ancestors in faith tended to take their dreams seriously. As Western interest moved more to the outer world, the inner world was increasingly neglected and its preeminent product, dreams, became “God’s forgotten language”—a phrase coined by the Jungian analyst and Episcopal priest, John Sanford. Only the poets, artists, and assorted mystics continued to speak the old language.

This is no longer the case. Dissatisfied with a faith based on intellect and doctrine alone, and seeking a more direct experience of God, many people today explore the mystical practices and traditions of Christianity and other religions. The inner life is back—and with it, a lively interest in dreams.

Although Daniel and Joseph were interpreting dreams long before there were psychoanalysts, it was the birth of psychoanalysis that especially sparked the comeback of the inner life.

The renewed interest began with Sigmund Freud, who in 1899 famously wrote that dreams were “the royal road to the unconscious.” His one-time disciple, Carl Jung, has been even more influential. With an approach to dreams broader and more religion-friendly than Freud’s, Jung has become a key resource for the spiritual renewal movement and spiritual directors. The interest in dreams, the unconscious, and the inner life may be livelier today than at any period since biblical times.

What about you? Do you take your dreams seriously? Should you? You bet! Just think. If Joseph of Nazareth or the three wise men had ignored their dreams, Jesus would have perished as a young child and Christianity would never have been born. Or if Pilate had attended to his wife’s dream and dismissed the charges against Jesus, imagine how startlingly different our theology would be. Dreams can change the world.

They can change our lives, too.

Mack asks God if she ever gets mad at the ones she love and she says – “What parent doesn’t”

But, God reminds Mack that in her anger she still loves.

The next theme to explore is belief:

God says (p119) “I’m not asking you to believe anything, but I will tell you that you’re going to find this day a lot easier if you simply accept what is, instead of trying to fit it into your preconceived notions.”

What are our preconceived notions of God?

Mack’s preconceived notion is that God enjoys punishing those who disappoint God.

I am not who you think I am.

My joy is to cure not punish.

(p120) Mack says I don’t understand and God says right – we’re not done yet.

God is not done with us. Does God punish? We know God cures.

Mack had never seen three people share with such simplicity and beauty.

God is love

Mack is in awe of how the three respond with such graciousness – but really who is the boss?

God is really Father

Jesus is obedient – follows orders

An Mack is not sure of the Holy Spirit – maybe the ultimate free spirit.

After some banter the Spirit says the topic is of interest to God.

(p122) There is no concept of final authority – only unity in God – God is a great chain of being a circle of relationship

How do you understand this?

(p123) When people chose independence over relationship, you became a danger to each other. Authority and control became a problem.

Papa says “we carefully respect your choices, so we work within your system even while we seek to free you from them”

Does this make sense and how does what the author says here relate to your understanding of God and our relationship to God?

On p124 Jesus talks about creation – He and the Holy Spirit say that we are so broken we cannot understand relationship without hierarchy.

God reminds Mack that there is one place hierarchy doesn’t matter and that is with God.

Mack lashes out that God could intervene and stop the hurt.

God's response is: "there are millions of reasons to allow pain and hurt and suffering rather than to eradicate them, but most of those reasons can only be understood within each person's story. I am not evil. You are the ones who embraced fear and pain... and I will use every choice you make for ultimate good and the most loving outcome."

Wow. Is that right?

God says you can't understand because people try to make sense of the world using their own understanding.

The underlying flaw in Mack and by implication in all people is that they don't think God is really good.

Trust is the fruit of relationship

This is most certainly true.

How do you develop trust outside relationship?

How does trust develop?

If you don't know God loves you how can you trust?

God says – be with me for awhile.

One last comment from Mack at the end of the chapter sums up our misunderstanding of Go. "I just can't imagine any final outcome that would justify all this (meaning loss of Missy – war – etc.)

God says "we aren't justifying it. We are redeeming it".

Talk about what that means to you and how you understand this statement.

## The Shack Lesson 9

Mack is off into the garden with Sarayu. Mack has overindulged on greens at breakfast and Sarayu gives him something to counteract their effect. Mack says but they were so good.

Now it might be easy to slide past this conversation but it reflects on how we relate to God. God provides for us and we – humankind- have a tendency to overindulge on the good stuff. We as Americans are a nation that overindulges – or do we.

Is nature ours to do with what we will? Are we still under the charge God gave us at creation to care for all creation? Are we still children of the 60's "if it feels good do it", use it, abuse it?

Sarayuu has Mack help her clear a spot in the garden and they do the hard work of clearing. Mack can't quite understand why – it looked good to him. God had another purpose for it.

This leads the two into a discussion of creation and whether God created poisonous plants, stinging nettles etc.

Sarayuu says "...created everything that actually exists, including what you consider bad stuff, but when we created it it was good.

Does God create evil?

Sarayuu suggests people perverted creation – this comes down to an understanding of original sin.

Original sin may better be classified as universal sin – that which we cannot overcome without a savior.

Sin is a disordering of what God intended – God created Satan in that Satan was one of God's angels who set about to be God and disorder God's creation. God did not create the evil, God created good and creatures with free will set about to disorder God's creation and destroy the good.

Sarayuu reminds Mack that this state will not remain forever (p132).

Sarayuu and Mack have a discussion about poisonous plants and Sarayuu says when I am with you and if I direct you to do something it is safe.

How do we find God's direction? Bible Study? Dialogue with one another and God – prayer? Dreams?

Sarayuu says "Freedom involves trust and obedience inside a relationship of love?

Does that make sense to you? Explain what that means to you.

The Shack – study guide. Copyright Rev. Scott Anderson January 28, 2009  
All rights reserved

Sarayu begins a deeper discussion of good and evil.

She says humans have a great capacity for declaring something good or evil, without truly knowing. (p133) eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was devastating for the human race.

Mack says was there really a garden?

Wouldn't we all like to ask God that question?

God says yes. How do you understand the garden of Eden?

Sarayu asks Mack how do you determine if something is good or evil?

How do we decide that? On what do we base our judgment?

Mack says something is good when I like it. That sounds like my way of thinking. How about yours?

Sarayu points out that when this is how we determine – we become a judge. She further points out that we play god in our independence. To fix this we must" give up your right to decide what is good and evil on your own terms" (p136)

EVIL IS A WORD WE USE TO DESCRIBE THE ABSENCE OF GOOD. I would go further. Evil is the absence of God.

Now the discussion turns to Missy and Sarayu says things that are hard to hear. "a child is protected because she is loved, not because she has a right to be protected" (p137) Rights are where survivors go so they won't have to work out relationships.

Look at the discussion about this on page 137. What do you think?

Jesus was fully obedient, did not hold onto rights. He served others only.

Sarayu ends the chapter by saying this garden is you – this mess is your soul and we will work on it together. All the while God is well please with the mess in the garden, because God loves Mack and loves us as we are.

## Lesson 10

Walk on the water with Jesus.

P. 140

Why is it so hard to trust Jesus who created nature to overcome nature? Mack feared? Mack says I'm afraid of looking like an idiot, I'm afraid of sinking, I imagine...

And Jesus says You imagine. Such power in imagination. How can imagination be a stumbling block to faith?

Jesus asks Mack to live in the present as humans are meant to do. Imagination usually has nothing to do with the present (p141)

We are called to live in the present. We are forgiven for our past and we can't predict the future can we? Are there things we can do today that will help our future?

Mack realizes Jesus is always absent in his imagination of the future. How about you?

Mack and Jesus go to the other side walking on the water in trust in the present. Mack finds joy (I think) in the journey even though he acknowledges the impossibility of the situation.

p.144 is a dialogue of caring for the earth.

Did you find this troubling? Are we good stewards or plunderers?

p. 145 Mack asks why don't you fix it (the earth)

Jesus says we gave it to you. I am a Lord that does not take control says Jesus. We were given the earth to be in relationship to God as God is in relation to God's own self.

p.146

The difference between men and women. Men find fulfillment in achievements women find it in relationships. Is that true?

When we try to play at being what we aren't we play at being God p.147

Jesus says the answer is simple turn to me (Metanoia)- re-turn to God.

p.148

Power in the hands of independent humans, be they men or women, does corrupt. Jesus says filling roles is the opposite of relationship.

How do you understand this?

P 149

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

One last thing before you go – Jesus says. Just like love, submission is something you cannot do on your own.

Jesus says apart from my life in you you can't submit.

Mack says – I can't just ask WWJD  
Good intentions – bad idea

We know what Jesus would do. Jesus would go, be denied, suffer, be killed and on the third day rise.

Jesus says p149 – we are not to mimic Jesus, but to live love independently.



## Lesson 11

Mack follows the path that Jesus told him to follow and walks into the mountain.

Mack takes a seat in front of a stunningly beautiful woman sitting as a judge behind a desk.

Mack says (p153) who are you.

The woman speaks – do you know why you are here?

Mack says no.

P154 – Mack which of your children do you love the most?

How does one answer that question?

Mack says I love them differently – each is unique.

Mack is asked – well what about when they don't behave or do as you know they should.

Mack says it doesn't affect my love for them.

The beautiful woman says knowing is what grows (relationship) and love simply expands to contain it. Love is just the skin of knowing.

This is how the Father loves (p156)

Mack restates his anger with God for not loving Missy enough.

Mack is then told he is in front of this woman for judgment. (p157)

Boy does Mack squirm – he asks – am I dead? Judgment only comes at death? But if I'm not dead this isn't fair. What if I repent? - can I get out of this. Boy is he squirming.

Is life fair?

Then the figure asks (158) is there something you wish to repent. Mack says – I don't know where to begin. My life is a mess.

Where would you begin – well don't answer that out loud.

Then the grand reversal happens.

Mack you are here to be the judge not to be judged.

Mack says – I can't judge but Mack is reminded that he judges all the time and is asked what his criteria are for judging and he doesn't know – his head is spinning

Mack is put in the Judgment seat (p159-160)

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

Mack is to judge God and the human race.

The judge asks Mack about judging the man who killed Missy and --- he can do that (p161)

The judge asked – what about the parent who helped to form him into what he is.

How far back do you go in judging – ultimately you judge the God of creation.

Mack says – yes God is responsible.

Okay – so now you are the judge – (p162) Choose

2 of your kids go to heaven but only two. 3 of your kids go to hell. You pick.

Mack – you think God does this – so you do it.

Mack said I can't – I assumed God could.

The two – judge and Mack fight and Mack refuses to pick until finally he says – okay what if I go instead.

The judge says – now you sound like Jesus - you judged well.

Mack says I haven't judge and she says yes, you judged your children worthy of love.

Mack says okay – I get Jesus but I don't get God.

How could God let Missy suffer so.

P164 – God didn't stop Missy's suffering – he doesn't stop anything that causes him pain.

How do you understand sin and suffering as causing God pain?

God chose the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love.

God chose love over justice.

The judge says Missy's dying was not God's plan – what happened to Missy was the work of evil

What is the work of evil?

Mack surrenders and says – I do want to trust Papa.

Once Mack surrenders – he sees all his kids – Missy included. They are playing and having fun together.

He realizes that Missy is now okay – she feels Mack's love.

After the idyllic scene with Missy, the other kids and Jesus the judge says:

Judgment is not about destruction but setting things right.

## Lesson 12

### In the belly of the beast

The Great Sadness was gone it had been washed away in the mists of the waterfall p 170( in the waters of baptism our sadness should was away)  
Mack's separation from God in the sadness had defined him.

How do we let the things that separate us from God define us?

He now knew Missy was okay. Do we trust in the promise that our love ones who die are okay, or do we have to rely on psychic readers and the like to help us communicate with them and find comfort?  
What does it mean to trust God?

Jesus and Mack begin a new conversation about Mack's family on p. 171.

Jesus says – your family is wonderful, but your daughter Kate is struggling but we aren't done with her yet.  
Jesus is with us in the struggles of life.

Sophia – is Greek for Wisdom

Paul refers to the concept, notably in 1 Corinthians, but obscurely, deconstructing worldly wisdom:

"Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"  
(1 Corinthians 1:20)

Paul sets worldly wisdom against a higher wisdom of God:

"But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory." (1 Corinthians 2:7)

Sophia is the personification of Papa's wisdom says the author of the Shack. Mack says his time with the wisdom of God seemed very long but only a short time passed. God's time is different than ours.

Mack says nothing with the wisdom of God is normal and Jesus tells Mack – no when you are with the wisdom of God – that is normal  
We are so lost (p. 172) and independent that we complicate things and the wisdom of God seems simply profound.  
Discuss this

p.173 – Mack is troubled about Missy. He wonders about her terror in the truck alone.

Jesus says – I never left her.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit was with her and that Missy had a deep faith and that after the initial shock, Missy and Jesus talked.

Jesus says she knew my peace.

In the midst of death, terror and pain – we hold the promise that Jesus is with us. Is this truly a comfort? We want God to make things right – to fix life, not just be present. But, can we demand free will and then expect Jesus to intervene when it is convenient for us?

Then Mack and Jesus set off back across the lake. Mack sinks a little but has faith that he can walk on water again and begins to rise and then Jesus joins him and says this always work's better when we do it together.

I think life works better when we do it together –

As they are walking Mack says – I'm glad to finally talk about Missy, I've kept it bottled up – why do we keep all that crap inside?

Jesus says – because we believe it's safer.

Do we?

Jesus says change takes time. - How long we ask – As long as it takes. Do you agree?

Mack acknowledges the relief he feels over talking about Missy and asks Jesus why they didn't offer him this opportunity sooner in the visit (p176)

Jesus says: don't think we didn't try. Have you noticed that in your pain you assume the worst of me? I've been talking to you for a long time but today is the first time you could hear it.

How about us? Do we assume the worst of Jesus, do we hear Jesus?

Jesus says it's all part of the timing of grace. Each choice people make ripples out through time and relationships bouncing off of other choices and God weaves it all into a tapestry.

Mack says : I GUESS ALL I CAN DO IS FOLLOW.

How about us?

Then Mack asks – was I seeing Missy in heaven?

Jesus says Heaven is not like story books or what we picture.

Jesus says Heaven will be a new cleansing of the universe and will look a lot like here.

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

Revelation tells us New Jerusalem will descend to earth. Rev. 21: 1-6

Jesus talks about the church as the woman Jesus loves. Mack says that doesn't sound like the church I know. Jesus says you are only seeing the institution of the church (p178)

Jesus says church is all about relationship – sharing life.

Jesus says we don't have to figure it all out just be with me.

How simple, how profound, how true – just be with the God whose name is to be.

(p180) If you try to live this without me, without ongoing dialogue, it will be like trying to walk on water without me. You can't.

Chapter 12 ends with a discussion of who loves Jesus, just Christians? Jesus says I am not a Christian (p182)

Jesus says those who love me come from every system. They are Buddhists, Mormons, Baptists, Muslims, Democrats, Republicans. I have followers that were murderers, and many who are self righteous.

Mack asks – do you mean all roads lead to you?

Jesus says it means that I will travel any road to find you.

We forget – Jesus says I chose you. We don't choose. Jesus finds us.

Let's discuss other religions, other ways and how we truly understand that Jesus finds us.

## Lesson 13

### A Meeting of the Hearts.

Mack acknowledges his conversation with Sophia and says he is so sorry for having judged God.

Papa says that's past, I don't want your sorrow, I just want us to grow together.

Isn't that the truth of grace?

(p185) Did Missy have to die so you could change me? Mack asks.

Whoa there Mack, says Papa. That's not how I do things.

Don't we say all the time. God gives us just what we can handle. This pain I am feeling must be God's way of dealing with me. Does God cause us hurt to heal us?

Papa says at the bottom of 185 Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies.

Grace doesn't depend on suffering but where there is suffering there is grace.

Discuss this.

Middle of p.186 God talks about how we look at God as a duality; Jesus good and God the bad guy who punishes.

In the midst of this God still loves us and Mack can't understand how God can love him.

Do we wonder how can God love me?

p.187 – This is an interesting discussion of how God reacts to our way of living with God – also Mack and Papa talk about guilt.

Papa says: guilt will never help you find freedom in me.

What do you think about that?

Then they talk about the lies we tell ourselves that are like “little fortresses” inside to make us feel safe and powerful.

We use them to build up defenses and manipulate others. We justify little lies – sometimes we say they protect those who we love.

We lie to avoid emotions – within ourselves and with those we are in relationship with (p188) At the bottom of the page, Papa says take the risks of honesty, ask forgiveness, pray.

Sounds like a great way to live life.

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

p.189 – What if? We ask those questions all the time. What if?  
Papa says what if is the risk of faith. How do you understand that?

Near the bottom of the page, after a discussion of forgiveness and denial of relationship God says: "... my love is a lot bigger than your stupidity"

Thanks be to God.

Mack is still trying to comprehend God (isn't that what we all do) and says "But, if I understand what you're saying, the consequences of our selfishness are part of the process that brings us to the end of our delusions, and helps us find you. Is that why you don't stop evil?"

If only it were that simple says Papa. Nobody knows what horrors I have saved the world from 'cuz people can't see what never happened.

Do you think that's true?

After some discussion – God says love that is forced is no love at all.

What do you think of that statement?

(p. 191) Papa says: "you demand your independence, but then complain that I actually love you enough to give it to you"

Is that true?

My purposes are always and only an expression of love. –Papa

Mack asks God the profound question: What exactly did Jesus accomplish by dying?

Papa: "just the substance of everything that love purposed from before the foundations of Creation. (p192) everything is about Jesus, creation and history are all about Jesus. ...through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world.

Mack asks – the whole world or just those who believe?

RECONCILIATION IS A TWO WAY STREET, AND I HAVE DONE MY PART TOTALLY, COMPLETELY, FINALLY. Papa

Let's talk about this

## Lesson 14

God is a verb. Verb and other freedoms.

Mack takes a paddle out on the lake and just enjoys the beauty. Sarayu appears and tells Mack it's time for dinner.

Mack asks if she was with him the whole time and of course she says yes. P195 – Mack says I didn't realize or rather I didn't know you were here.

Sarayu says for you to know or not has nothing at all to do with whether I am actually here or not. I am always with you.

Do we understand this any better than Mack does?

P196 – Sarayu- you will better recognize my voice as we continue to grow our relationship.

Sarayu and Mack discuss feelings and emotions and Sarayu says emotions are the colors of the soul; when you don't feel, the world becomes dull and colorless.

P197 – Mack says relationship is more than following rules.

Sarayu asks what rules.

Mack says you know all that Scripture tells us.

Sarayu asks – how's that working for you?

How about you?

Sarayu says use the Bible as a picture of Jesus not a set of rules. Mack says but rules are simpler than relationship.

How profound – is it true?

Their discussion ends with Mack asking for help to live the truth – he says maybe that's his simple prayer.

Might it not be ours also?

They go to dinner and at the table (p200) Mack asks why do you love humans or more specifically why do you love me? I mean we offer nothing to the relationship

To answer the question – Papa asks do you love your children more when they perform well? Mack says I feel more fulfilled when they are in my life. Do you?

Papa says – we are already fully fulfilled within ourself. I am fully human in Jesus but I am a totally separate other in my nature.

How do you understand this?



Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

The conversation moves on and Mack says what do I do with this experience when I get back, what do you expect of me.

Mountain top experiences are hard to translate to those who do not experience them - have you ever tried to do that?

P 202-203 is a discussion of the ten commandments – the law  
Review the pages and discuss.

p.204 - God is a verb.

God is more attuned to verbs than nouns  
Confessing, repenting, living, loving, responding, growing, etc.  
Humans take alive verbs which are full of grace and turn them into dead nouns full of rules.  
The discussion continues onto page 205 – what do you understand from this discussion?

On p 205 Sarayu asks about the difference between expectancy and expectation. Let's talk about the difference.

P206 – responsibilities and expectations are the basis of shame and judgment, and they provide the essential framework that promotes performance as a basis for identity and value.

That's a lot to ponder – what do you think of this?

Papa says people don't disappoint. God has a constant and living expectancy in relationship with people.

Then they all have a discussion of setting priorities – God first, family, church, work, etc.

The trouble with priorities, Sarayu says is that it sees everything as a hierarchy, a pyramid.

Papa says, I don't just want you to make me top priority I want all of you.

How do you understand this concept?

## Lesson 15

### A Festival of Friends

Sarayu has “healed” Mack’s eyes and he opens them to a blinding light.

Light and color – emotion and relationship.

God is a God of light, we say we walk in the light of Christ, we are called to the light, the light no darkness can overcome.

Chapter 15 begins with Mack opening his eyes to a new reality, to a new dimension of understanding relationship.

Children are white, all colors combined until they mature and become who they will be.

What do you think of the author’s description of light and life.

We are told that the one person whose light they are focusing on is Mack’s father, who is having trouble controlling his emotions.

They rush together in a burst of color and light and Mack expresses love. With God we can do all things, even forgive the tormentors of life.

Jesus is the light and we are indeed called to walk in the light.

This chapter is one idea of what that light and life could look like.

## Lesson 16

### A morning of Sorrows

Papa has changed appearance and is taking Mack on a journey. (p219)  
This morning you are going to need a father – God provides what we need.

This is an ongoing theme with God – God provides if we but open our eyes to see.

p.222- God says I knew that my Creation would rebel, would choose independence and death, and I knew what it would cost me to open a path of reconciliation.

God says there was no way to create freedom without cost.

The second paragraph on the page describe a way of understanding God in creation. How do you respond to this understanding?

God says he had the capability to stop Missy's death, but that's not how God acts in the world.

God says he can uses Missy's death for good.

Mack acknowledges trust in God even when he doesn't understand.

Can we trust God even when we don't understand?

Papa says he has something to show Mack but that Mack has one more thing to take away that darkens his heart.

God says this will hurt. But, God says this is not about shaming you. I don't do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation. Those things were nailed with Jesus to the cross. P 223

Papa is asking Mack to forgive the man who killed Missy.

Mack named that he wanted revenge.

Is that not a most human reaction and desire.

We hear in the news all the time, we want closure, no we want revenge and that is closure.

God says to Mack – forgiveness is not forgetting/

How do you understand this concept?

p. 225 Forgiveness. Read the page together and discuss.

We pray – Father forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others.

Do we mean that?  
What do you think it means that if we forgive we release God to forgive?

Forgiveness doesn't mean relationship  
How do you understand this?

P226 – forgiveness in no way requires that you trust the one you forgive. Should they finally confess and repent, you will discover a miracle in your own heart that allows you to reach out and begin to build between you a bridge of reconciliation.

That's a hard thought – when what we want is revenge.

Mack says – if I forgive this guy gets off free. Is it fair to Missy if I don't stay angry with him?

We can only forgive with God's presence in us. It is the power of God in us that allows forgiveness – how do you respond to this?

Mack breaks down and asks God to help him – isn't that how to live a life of trust, hope and faith in God?

How do I say I forgive – God says out loud.  
God rejoices in the act of forgiveness.

From the ELCA website on justice, revenge and forgiveness. As Christians it is important that we consider the biblical meaning of God's justice and differentiate that meaning from what we hear in our culture. God's justice opposes the notion of "infinite justice" whose goal is to exact payment for crimes. God's justice offers clues to change the self-destructive path of our globalized civilization.

The key to entering into this concept can be found in the brief dialogue between Peter and Jesus Christ in Mt. 18.21-22: "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'" Jesus' response refers to the tale of Cain and his descendant Lamech. In the face of infinite vengeance, the Christian faith proposes infinite forgiveness. To forgive seven times seventy means to forgive ad infinitum.

God's justice is strange, as it does not condemn the killer. It is hard to understand that when we come down to earth, walking among corpses of innocent victims, such as the victims in New York or Afghanistan. Nevertheless, if you enter into the logic of those civilizations projected by

Lesson Plan for The Shack by Wm.Paul Young.  
Copyright: Reverend Scott Anderson, all rights reserved

the Cain-Lamech myth (ultimate vengeance) , there is no better way out than interfering and breaking once and for all the cycle of sacrifice and infinite vengeance by means of the infinite forgiveness: "seven times seventy." The specific beings are victims of that system whose logic demands war or vengeance to make justice or bring "peace and salvation." This is called "structural sin," by Paul, and he proposes that God's justice will save us from the law (its logic), sin and death. God's justice does not justify crimes but advances another logic which, through forgiveness, can bring transformation and reconciliation to humanity. God does all this out of love for the victims, so that in the book of life in the universe, there appears the heading Never More.

Papa reminds Mack it is okay to forgive but still be angry. Forgiveness is like a clanging bell. It may have to be tolled (said, told, spoken) as often as a bell rings once the rope is pulled. Forgiveness may have to be done more than once until forgiveness truly occurs and one turns the cause of forgiveness over to God.

Papa says they aren't done yet. Mack rejoices in the promise that someday God will give him new life with no tears. God says I promised to be with you in the tears and wipe them from your eyes.

Ten they tenderly retrieve Missy.

## Lesson 17

Choices of the heart.

They bury Missy and there are wonderful thoughts expressed over the burial.

Then God gives Mack a choice, go back to you family or stay with us. Either way, I will be with you.

God gives Mack insight into Kate's thoughts and how she feels responsible for Missy's death.

Mack chooses to go back.

They share bread and wine –

A Holy Communion – relationship over a meal

Mack doesn't get to say goodbye and then her realizes this is a silly thought anyway.

So the Shack returns to it's true nature, the cold returns and Mack leaves only to be hurt in a wreck

## Lesson 18

Thoughts to reflect on the final chapter.

Mack tells Willie – God said to tell you I am especially fond of you.

Mack shares his story with Nan. He starts by asking Nan's forgiveness and he confesses to her.

Sounds like a pretty good way to be in relationship.

What do you think?

p. 244 and 245 read the healing of Kate and talk about what you hear.

How could we ever share such a story with others?

How do we share the story of God with us with others now?

What can we learn from Mack's time at the Shack?

# Central texts and Confessional References

## ELCA (by no means a complete list)

### Who is God?

Genesis

Exodus 3 specifically: Exodus 3:14; Exodus 3:6

Isaiah 45:5, 21-24

Isaiah 40:25-26

Isaiah 45 10-11

Leviticus 11:44

Romans 9:20-21

Ephesians 2: 6-10

John 3:16

### Apostolic Faith – who is Jesus

Romans 1: 1-4

2 Samuel 7:14

Galatians 4: 4-6

Romans 8:3

Acts 2:36

Acts 10:42

Acts 17:31

1 John 4: 9-10

1 Corinthians 1-2

John 8:58

John 10:30

Hebrews 1: 8,10

Hebrews 1:1-3

### Unity of God with Jesus

“The apostolic tradition identifies Jesus of Nazareth, a Palestinian Jew of the first century, who was crucified, as being on with the reality of God. “Yeago. Typescript p56.

God and Jesus in Unity (one but distinguishable)

John 1

John 5: 23,26

John 8:19,23,58

John 10: 30

John 14:1, 9-10

John 17:5

John 20:26-28

Acts 20:28

Romans 9:5

Titus 2:13

1John 5:20



# Trinity

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . .'" (Gen. 1:26).

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1)

"But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.'" (Acts 5:3-4)

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

The doctrine of the Trinity is encapsulated in Matthew 28:19, where Jesus instructs the apostles to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The parallelism of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is not unique to Matthew's Gospel; it appears elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:14; Heb. 9:14), as well as in the writings of the earliest Christians, who clearly understood them in the sense that we do today—that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three divine Persons who are one divine being (God).

# Modalism

Notes on Modalism from [The Doctrine of the Trinity, typescript](#), David Yeago, p152  
"a special warning against modalism...the doctrine of the Trinity means that we experience God in three ways...the central error of Modalism is to take the three Trinitarian Persons primarily as ways deity impinges experientially on us: the divine appears in our experience in the three modes of father-creator, son-redeemer, and spirit-sanctifier. But in the New Testament and the teaching of the Church, the three Persons are not identified in terms of their relations to us, but in terms of their relations to one another.

In the economy of salvation, these Three appear as characters interacting with one another in a narrated history: Jesus and his Father and the Spirit in whom they are united in love. The doctrine of the Trinity arises from reflection on the way in which Holy Scripture presents the relations of these three to one another, not as symbolic expressions of "our experience of God." ...

“The standard prayer pattern is to call on the Father in, with, and through the Son, in the power of the Spirit who joins us to Christ and his Father. ... A modalist account of the Trinity would necessarily demolish this audacious understanding of prayer.”

What Dr. Yeago is talking about is turning Father, Son and Holy Spirit into mere modes of action, ie: creator, redeemer and sanctifier. God wants us to partake fully, in the fullness of God.

## **The Triune God**

### **God's three faces**

The term *Trinitas* (Latin) was coined by the early church theologian Tertullian (A.D. 160-225) and probably first used in the sense of the coexistence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the unit of the Godhead by Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch in Syria (A.D. 169-177). While not a biblical term, The Trinity represents the crystallization of New Testament teaching. In writing his first letter to the Corinthians in about A.D. 55, just two decades after Christ's death and resurrection, St. Paul correlates Spirit, Lord and God (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). There is a similar correlation in the benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14 and in the trinitarian baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19.

The church's confession of faith originated as a baptismal formula. "In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit asserts that God reveals himself in a threefold manner because he is a triune God. The doctrine is founded on the events of revelation in which the living God has disclosed himself to the world and manifested his determination to establish communion with humankind" (*Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*).

### **Creation, redemption, reconciliation**

"When the church, on the basis of the prophetic and apostolic witness, confesses one God it confesses its faith that the creator at the beginning of time and the re-creator at the end and the redeemer at the center of time is one God. And again, when the church, in obedience to the same witness, worships this one God by three distinct names, it recognizes and acknowledges the difference between creation, reconciliation, and redemption, and it confesses in the one God the three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (*Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*).

### **Who is God?**

ELCA Lutherans believe that God reveals who God really is to us. Therefore the Christian church must confess its faith in the essential Trinity. God is one God, revealed in three persons. Article 1 of the *Augsburg Confession* affirms the doctrinal decisions of the fourth century that deal with the oneness of the divine substance which is God, and the difference of the three persons (sometimes spoken of by their functions as Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier), declaring them fundamental for the faith of the Reformation. ELCA Lutherans fully subscribe to these confessions presented by the reformers to Emperor Charles V in 1530 in Augsburg, Germany.

Of the Godhead Article 1 of the *Augsburg Confession* says, "We unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the Council of Nicea, that there is one divine essence which is called and which is God, eternal, incorporated, indivisible, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the maker and preserver of all things, visible and invisible. Yet there are three persons, of the same essence and power, who are also co-eternal: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, together with the other 135 Lutheran World Federation\* member churches, therefore, are Trinitarian churches, understanding that God has chosen to reveal God's self in triune fashion so that we might better know, understand and witness to God's activity in the world. With Western Christian churches, we celebrate the Sunday after Pentecost as Trinity Sunday.

\* [Lutheran World Federation](#) churches span 78 countries, with approximately 68.6 million members in 140 member churches.

*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon, 1976

*The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, Augsburg, 1965

## Jesus Christ

### **The New Testament witness**

The New Testament is the only document that gives us a reliable picture of Jesus of Nazareth, who he is and what he means for humankind. The Gospel according to St. Mark, the earliest of the recorded Gospels, (about 70 A.D.) says, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:9-11).

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews calls him "... the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross ... and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

St. Paul, the earliest of the New Testament writers, says, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:15-20).

St. John's Gospel calls Jesus the Word, saying "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through

him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:1-5).

### **The universal Christ**

ELCA theologian, Carl Braaten, writes: "(Jesus) is clearly depicted as the Messiah of Israel, God's only Son, the Lord of creation, the Savior of all humanity. The New Testament abounds with titles which identify the uniqueness of Jesus. It is simply not possible to ... subtract these titles from the picture of the Man and have any real Jesus at all. We have no picture of Jesus as merely Jesus, to interpret as we please. The only Jesus we know is Jesus as the Christ, Son of God, Logos, Lord, Savior — all titles of highest possible honor, putting him in the place which Israel had reserved for God alone, so much so that ultimately the church's "trinitarian formula (Father, Son and Holy Spirit)" (becomes) the only sound way to speak about the identity and meaning of Jesus. If we rightly read the New Testament, we learn that Jesus is not a son of God, but the only Son, not a savior, but the only Savior, not a Lord, but the Lord of lords, etc." Braaten goes on to say: "The special quality of Jesus' uniqueness is best grasped in terms of his universal meaning. The concrete person, Jesus of Nazareth, is unique because of his unequaled universal significance. The point of his uniqueness underlines his universality. If Jesus is the Lord and Savior, he is the universal Lord and Savior, not merely my personal Lord and Savior."\*

### **True God, true man**

But for Christians all over the world he is that, too — a personal Lord and Savior. The earliest of the [universal Christian creeds](#), confessed by ELCA Lutherans in worship and drawn from the New Testament witness, says:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father,  
Through him all things were made  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven;  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the virgin Mary, and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

### **Incarnation, salvation, invitation**

For ELCA Lutherans, as for all Christians, Jesus is fully man and fully God. We

believe that in this Jesus atonement (the reconciliation of God and humankind) is accomplished. He is God's promised Messiah, the Christ, humankind's savior. In him, "God reveals to us most supremely who God is, how God relates to us and the world, and the depths to which God will go for our salvation." \*\*

ELCA Lutherans believe that incarnated, enfleshed in this First Century human being, God's promise to redeem all creation is fulfilled, God's righteousness is shown, and God's covenant with humankind is fulfilled. We believe that Jesus, who having been put to death by crucifixion by the decree of the Roman curator Pontius Pilate, was witnessed as resurrected, and became, in the words of St. Paul, the first born of the dead (Romans 6:1-11). We believe that in his death our own sin and separation from God died. We believe that God intends humankind to participate in a resurrection like his that will unite us with him in his heavenly kingdom. Just so -- as he did with St. Peter and St. Andrew -- this Jesus invites each of us in our lifetime to "Follow me" (Matthew 3:19).

\* Carl Braaten, *The Universal Meaning of Jesus Christ*, Lutheran Church in America, *Partners Magazine*, December, 1980

\*\* Terence E. Fretheim, *About The Bible*, Augsburg Fortress, 1999

## **The Resurrection**

The Bible records incidents that define two kinds of resurrection: (1) restoration of a deceased person to the conditions of the present life and (2) resurrection that confers upon the deceased a new and permanent form of life.

### **Before Jesus**

The first resurrection type, a restoration or resuscitation, is stated or implied in a few Old Testament passages (i.e. the Elijah and Elisha cycles - 1 Kings 17:17-24 and 2 Kings 4:18-37 respectively). At the same time, the absence of a general resurrection concept of the second type is consistent with the Old Testament's silence on any form of afterlife. The Hebrew understanding of the self as this earthly body made it impossible to conceive of a resurrection that was not restorative of that self, as can be observed in the passages cited.

Belief in a general resurrection as an afterlife first surfaces in the Inter-testamental period during the three centuries before Jesus' birth, particularly the Maccabean period, 167-37 B.C. (cf. Daniel 12:2, 2 Macabees 7:9, 11, 23 and 14:46). We learn from the New Testament and First Century (A.D.) historian Josephus that, by Jesus' time, the Pharisees believed in this kind of resurrection to an afterlife while the Sadducees and Samaritans did not (Matthew 22:23, Mark 12:18, Luke 20:27 and Acts 23:8).

## **New Testament restorative resurrections**

Three of Jesus' miracles, usually classified as resurrections, are in the vein of restoration or resuscitation:

- Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9:18 ff, Mark 5:21ff and Luke 8:40ff) - though Jesus, himself, denied this as a resurrection (see quoted passages)
- the Nain widow's son (Luke 7 ff), which many scholars also classify as a resuscitation since in ancient Palestine burial occurred on the day of death
- Lazarus (John 11:1-44), which stands by itself because he was resuscitated after three days in the tomb.

The resuscitation of Eutychus by Paul (Acts 20:8-12) is clearly more resuscitation than resurrection.

## **Jesus and the resurrection**

Far more important to ELCA members is Jesus' own resurrection - which picks up the second biblical concept: conferring a new form of life on the deceased. This is properly the object of Christian belief in a resurrection of/from the dead. It is the empty tomb, not Jesus' resurrection as event, that first confronts us in the New Testament narrative of his rising from the dead.

ELCA members note that Jesus foretells his death and resurrection several times (e.g., Matthew 16:21, 17:9, 17:23, 20:19, Mark 8:3, 9:9, 9:31, 10:34; Luke 9:22, 18:33), but that each of these predictions is accompanied by explicit notices that the predictions were unintelligible to the disciples. Likewise, accounts of Jesus' resurrection emphasize the doubt and uncertainty of the disciples.

In four passages (Mark 16:12, Luke 24:16, John 20:14 and 21:4) the witnesses fail to recognize the risen Christ. Nor is Jesus seen by any who are not in his wider circle of disciples (with the exception of St. Paul). Clearly, Jesus' resurrection was not simply a return to his previous condition of life.

All of this has led some scholars to write that the risen Jesus (and apparitions of the risen Jesus) is a supernatural reality which does not belong to this world and cannot be the object of historic investigation. Rather, Jesus' resurrection is an object of faith.

Accordingly, ELCA members believe that what history does is to demonstrate the disciples' faith in the resurrection. Their witness and testimony to Jesus' post-death appearances make it abundantly clear that the resurrection was a primary object of the apostolic proclamation from Christianity's very beginning.

(In Acts 1:22 we see that the person who is to replace Judas as one of the 12 must be a witness to Jesus' resurrection.)

## **Resurrection in Christ**

"In the New Testament the resurrection is not an argument for faith but that which faith first apprehends, the risen and glorified Jesus. The resurrection is the climactic achievement in the saving deeds of God. To recognize the event as a fact is nothing; to accept it as a saving deed is to believe in it and to receive the salvation which is achieved by it. In John 20:29 it is faith in the resurrection, not observation of the fact, which is blessed by Jesus" (Dictionary of the Bible, p. 733).

ELCA members' faith in Jesus' resurrection and his promises for us underlie our belief that we will be resurrected - created anew - in him. It is the ultimate life passage - from this earthly life to a promised new creation. In the New Testament, it is often explicit and always implicit, particularly in St. Paul's writings, that redemption is achieved by death and resurrection together. Redemption is God the Father's work and it is this God who raised Jesus from the dead (e.g. Romans 4:24, 1 Corinthians 6:14, Ephesians 1:20). Jesus' resurrection places him in a new life which comes from the Father who is the source of all life. In this act, Jesus' redemptive work is complete. He is the firstborn of those who rise (Colossians 1:18) and in his resurrection Jesus communicates a new life to those who believe in him. For ELCA members the resurrection is not a return to the conditions of the present life, but to a life of the spirit, a new and permanent form of life, the life already possessed by the risen Jesus.

"Neither could the gates of death, nor the tomb's dark portal, nor the watchers, nor the seal, hold you as a mortal. Alleluia! Now we cry to our Lord immortal, who triumphant, burst the bars of the tomb's dark portal." (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #363)

### **Resurrection for all?**

Most New Testament passages refer to the resurrection of believers, some to a general resurrection to eternal joy, some to eternal punishment. While there are many to cite, examples of this include:

- Jesus was delivered to death for our sins and rose for our righteousness (Romans 4:24f)
- Baptism is burial with Christ in death, from which the Christian is raised to a new life like his (Romans 6:4 ff)
- The Christian is born anew to a life of hope through the resurrection of Jesus (1 Peter 1:3-4).

But ELCA members also look to New Testament texts that go beyond those parameters. St. Paul tells us, "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." (Colossians 1:18 ff; see also Romans 8:21-22). Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler coined the phrase "Cosmic Christ" in his 1952 address to the New Delhi assembly of the World Council of Churches, saying, "It is now excruciatingly clear that Christ cannot be a light that lighteth everyone coming into the world, if he is not also the light that falls upon the world into which everyone comes."

For ELCA members, the resurrection that completes the victory of Christ over sin and death is not intended for Christians alone. Our understanding of the resurrection's significance for humanity is enhanced by Luke 14:14: "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous," and when Jesus reminds us that "those who do what is true come to the light, that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God," (John 3:21).

Beyond that,

- our belief that Christ came into the world to redeem the world (John 3:17)

- our belief in the proclamation that God has "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth," (Ephesians 1:10)
- our trust in God's righteousness

causes us to bear witness that Christ, the principal of creation, is also the principal of the new life initiated by his resurrection for all creation. For St. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

ELCA members believe that, being "entrusted" with this message of reconciliation, we are to proclaim this salvation intended for all humankind, this redemption of the whole world, this resurrection to new life. And because it is in the "hands" of the faithful, righteous God who raised Jesus as the firstborn of the dead, we give God thanks!

Sources:

*The Lutheran* April 2004 issue, p. 23

*Dictionary of the Bible*, John L. McKenzie, S.J., McMillan, 1965

## **Holy Spirit**

"I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith."

For hundreds of years, Lutheran children have learned and often been asked to recite these words which introduce Martin Luther's explanation of the third article of The Apostle's Creed (Luther's Small Catechism). ELCA Lutherans believe that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies us in the faith, and that all of this flows from what we understand to be the Holy Spirit's paramount work -- to reveal and glorify Christ, and to strengthen the believer's faith.

The Spirit as person

For Luther the Spirit is both altogether person and altogether gift:

- person in the manner in which the Spirit comes to us and thus always remains the Lord
- gift in the manner in which the Spirit brings us to Christ and preserves us in the faith.\*



Together, Father, Christ and Holy Spirit are the manifestations of the one God whom we know and understand to be revealed in a trinity of persons. For ELCA Lutherans, the Holy Spirit - as person - might be said to be one of God's "three faces."

The center of God's divine activity is the incarnate Son of God, Jesus the Christ. Yet, just as the Son performed the work of the Father who sent him, so the Spirit performs the work of the Son. The Spirit underscores the fulfillment of prophecy, witnessing to God revealed in Jesus. In carrying on Jesus' earthly ministry, the Spirit's ongoing work is to reveal truth, give life and strengthen faith (John 7:39, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7-15).

In the doctrine's Old Testament roots, the Spirit is God present in

- the natural order, at work creating the world and sustaining life
- history, using Israel to reveal God's divine redemptive purpose for humankind
- individual believers, anticipating the New Testament doctrine of the Spirit who dwells in human hearts (indwelling Spirit).

The continuity to the New Testament can be seen as the Spirit

- comes to Mary to give birth to Jesus (Luke 1:35)
- is present at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:22 , often depicted in art as a descending dove)
- is given by the post-Resurrection Jesus to his disciples (John 20:22, often depicted in art as breath or wind), and
- enters and forms the church at Pentecost, extending Jesus' earthly ministry throughout the world (Acts 2:4 often depicted in art as tongues of fire).

The New Testament is uniquely a book of the Holy Spirit. All its writings, except 2 and 3 John, contain references to the Spirit.

Giver of life

The Holy Spirit as the "giver of life" has a central place in Christian revelation. ELCA Lutherans confess in the words of the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) that:

... We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the prophets. ...

In the Latin-speaking (Western) Church, the phrase *and the Son* (in Latin *filioque*) was first added to the Nicene Creed at the Synod of Toledo in Spain in 447. The formula was used in a letter from Pope Leo I to the members of that synod, responding to heresies they were confronting. (Primarily, it was added to the Creed in order to oppose the Arian heresy, which taught that the Son was a creature and not God.) At the third synod of Toledo in 589, the ruling Visigoths, who had been Arian Christians, submitted to the Catholic Church. They were obliged to accept the Nicene Creed with the *filioque*.\*\*

It is the essence of the Gospel that the new life in Christ from beginning to end is solely the work of the Spirit. The Spirit's essential work of bestowing God's grace of forgiveness is pure gift, renewing us so that Christ may dwell in us. For Christians, the Spirit makes the living and life-changing Christ a personally experienced reality. In John 14:16 we are told by Jesus that the Spirit is our Advocate, God's "face" which is given to dwell with us forever. John goes on to say, "You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (John 14:17). Thus the Spirit, whose intrinsic nature of vital ongoing divine activity is recognized within the early church, comes to humankind from both Father and Son.

### In church and world

ELCA Lutherans concur with Martin Luther that, "the Holy Spirit is among humans in a twofold way:

"First through a universal activity, by which [the Holy Spirit] preserves them as well as God's other creatures. ..." (Thus, the Spirit's activity is not limited to the sphere of faith and the church, but that all activity in which God engages with reference to the world and humankind is mediated through the Spirit.)

Secondly, the Holy Spirit "is gift from Christ" to believers. One can establish the principle that, for Luther, a relationship with God is possible only through the Spirit - understood in the strict sense as a person of the Trinity. He believed that there is not a single theological doctrine in which the activity of the Spirit is not fundamental. The activities of the Spirit are personal in nature: speaking, bearing witness, and uniting believers with one another in one body. Apart from the Spirit there is no activity of God in the world or in human life, no living Word, no grace of Baptism, no real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist, no conversion or regeneration, no faith or fellowship in Christ.

"The Gospel also ascribes to the Holy Spirit the creation and preservation of the Christian community, the church. Through this 'communion of saints,' which has been entrusted with the Word and the Sacraments, the Spirit creates faith and fellowship, and thus carries out God's purpose for humankind." The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5:22).\*

### In Word and Sacrament

For Luther the Spirit is the author of preaching the Gospel and, simultaneously, gift to humankind enclosed in the Word. He stressed both the Spirit as the creator of the new life and as indwelling witness. He professed that such things as "raising one's children, loving one's wife and obeying the magistrate are fruits of the Spirit."

At the same time, Luther taught and ELCA Lutherans profess that, within the Church, the Spirit works through the Word and Sacraments, so ELCA Lutherans appreciate Word and the Sacraments as instruments of the Spirit which "feed" our faith.

"In binding the Spirit to the external means of Word and Sacrament, Luther did not deny the inner working of the Spirit. However, he did understand these to be safeguards against the excesses of subjectivism and emotionalism, a kind of romanticizing or ecstatic internalization of the Spirit. He disputed the (Reformation era) fanatics' right to appeal to special inspirations apart from revelation or Word and Sacrament ... and noted that the Spirit's proper work is precisely a strengthening in faith."\* As Luther put it in his explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed, still professed by ELCA Lutherans:

... the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth. ... In this Christian church he daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers, and on the last day he will raise me and all the dead, and will grant eternal life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true."

We pray, following the Words of Institution, as we prepare to receive The Lord's Supper,

Send now we pray, your Holy Spirit, the spirit of our Lord and of his resurrection, that we who receive the Lord's body and blood may live to the praise of your glory and receive our inheritance with all your saints in light. Amen. Come, Holy Spirit. Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes as victorious Lord of all" (Lutheran Book of Worship).

\* Martin Luther's Theology, Bernhard Lohse, Augsburg Fortress, 1999, pp. 237-238, including citation of Luther's lectures on Galatians.

\*\* <http://en.allexperts.com/>

## **Angels**

### **Concepts and images**

As with others, ELCA Lutherans often discover that our 21st Century culture's concept of angels includes - and sometimes mixes - myth, folklore and Hollywood fantasy. That "mixed bag" may influence many who confess belief in God but who don't believe angels exist, even though angels are mentioned as God's emissaries in 34 of the 66 books in the Bible, including all four Gospels and seven letters of St. Paul. The Revelation to John (the last book in the New Testament) associates angels with the end times, as warriors and guardians of the churches, mentioning them in all but one (Chapter 13) of that book's 21 chapters.

In looking at what angels are or are not, and what role - if any - they play in our faith, we first need to acknowledge that our images of angels are probably more

influenced by centuries of Western Christian art than by what we read in Scripture. In a male-dominated culture, and in spite of believing them to be asexual and gender neutral, medieval artists often depicted angels as male. Because they believed that angels flew, they were often pictured with birdlike feathered wings, based on the only flying creatures known. Angels are depicted in manger scenes with the baby Jesus, his mother Mary and Joseph; with Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb; there are angelic hosts in battle; with saints being received into heaven; or as cherubs on wing hovering over children. Such depictions owe more to folklore than Scripture. They provide us with a kind of medieval "greeting card" characterization of angels.

Turning from these often fanciful images to the Bible, the source book for Christian faith, we can learn a number of things Biblical authors believed about the roles and functions of angels in salvation history. Lutherans, relying on both text and scholarship, understand that, just as medieval culture has influenced our pictures of angels, the folklore and culture of the Hebrews' ancient Near East neighbors probably exerted considerable influence on the authors of biblical texts that incorporate angels. Similar beings are found in other ancient Near Eastern religions. In fact, the influence of Babylonian and Persian religious traditions may have helped biblical authors form a coherent picture of angels as part of God's heavenly realm. Built on the kingship model where God is King, angels are at least among those who attend God's throne, serve as God's emissaries, provide the legions/armies of heaven, and sing God's praises.

### **God's messengers**

In Biblical Hebrew, the main meaning of the term angel (*mal'ak*) is "my messenger/envoy." However, not all messengers were angels. For instance, the name of the prophetic book that closes the Old Testament, Malachi, means "messenger," but its content makes it clear that Malachi was a human messenger - a prophet, not an angel.

Thus, not all messengers are angels, and angels are definitely not human beings - especially not dead human beings who "earn wings." This is the Hollywood image of "It's A Wonderful Life," though the idea's roots go back as far as the early Second Century A.D. (see "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" [1:39]). Jesus, talking about resurrected life, compares the resurrected to angels, but he does not say that the resurrected will become angels (Luke 20:36). Rather, the resurrected are the redeemed. In the Bible angels are a created order of spiritual beings, endowed with immortality and attendant upon God. Not needing redemption, they don't fall into the category of the resurrected.

Many tasks have been assigned to angels in Jewish and Christian tradition, folklore and folk theology, but the Bible sees them as a part of God being with and for us. They are God's created servants, appearing at key moments in Scripture (e.g. Jesus' birth, temptation, resurrection) and then giving way for human action. They worship God (Rev. 7:11), guide believers, take specific action upon God's command, celebrate (and presumably have other emotions, too), and carry on dialogue with both God (Zechariah 1:12) and human beings (Luke 1:13 ff). Definitely not cherub-like, they appear as warriors (Rev. 12:7) and protectors (Daniel 3:28), communicate messages from God (John 20:13), and appear as agents of God's judgment (Matt. 13:41 ff.).

They appear to people of all religions, or even of no religion at all, when God wants those people to listen. They exist to praise God and bear the message and task for which God sends them. And they have free will. Those in heaven chose to obey God (Matt. 6:10) while others chose to rebel (Jude 6; 2 Peter 2:4) and be led by Satan (Matt 25:4).

### **Guardian and so-called orders of angels**

People from many times and cultures - including those who are not Christian, Jewish, Mormon or Moslem - have said that angels also protect people. While Scripture doesn't say much about this "guardian angel" role (Ps 34:7 and Ps 91:11-12 and Acts 12:15 being passages often cited), Jesus speaks of children having their own angels (Matt. 18:10). The only angels called by name in the Bible are the archangels Michael and Gabriel, though in the intertestamental Apocrypha Raphael and Uriel are also named.

Angels are differentiated from cherubim and seraphim, about whom we're not told much but, unlike angels, they have no scriptural dealings with humans. God is said to place cherubim at Eden's gateway after banishing Adam and Eve. Some suggest that they are yet another category of attendants to God and were not considered to be angels. In the 5th Century, Pseudo-Dionysius' book "The Celestial Hierarchy" invented a ninefold order for supernatural beings; from highest to lowest they were Seraphs, Cherubs, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels and Angels. The order was designed mostly for philosophical reasons and is not biblical. St. Paul talks about most of these, but not as classifications or ranks, and not specifically as supernatural beings. St. Thomas Aquinas used an altered form of these in his "Summa Theologica" imagining what each did in detail, and this, too, has come to cloud the Biblical picture.

What we know is that the Bible does not depict angels as created in God's image (as we are) nor acting on their own (as we may). We, not angels, are said to be God's heirs. Angels, in the Bible, personally appear to see God's great presence and hear God's command, whereas we are created to walk not by sight but by faith. We're told not to worship angels (Colossians 2:18) nor pray to them, and the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews (1:5-14), in reflecting upon Jesus' glory "as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs," goes on to ask, "Are not all angels' spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?"

### **To believe in angels?**

Along with most other denominations, ELCA Lutherans celebrate September 29 as the liturgical feast day of St. Michael and All Angels. At the same time, some would ask, "Do we have need of angels as we conceive of God and God's dealings with us?" For some Lutherans the biblical images of angels are important sign posts in the story of salvation. Others would say that in this post resurrection time, because in our Baptism God has bound God's self to us for the rest of our life and sent the Spirit into our heart, we don't need guardian beings. For it is God who speaks to us in response to our prayers, and if another brings us God's message, it is more likely to

be a human messenger (one of the biblical uses of the term) rather than a supernatural one appearing in a dream.

Most ELCA Lutherans will agree that belief in angels is a non-issue. We confess in the Nicene Creed that "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." Perhaps it is sufficient to say that for ELCA Lutherans, angels are among "all that is, seen and unseen" in God's creation. We simply accept that they are in the Bible and may well be part of the realities of heaven that we will not fully understand in this life. Trusting in God alone and waiting to understand more when we are gathered to God's nearest presence, what is important to Lutheran Christians is the personal, forgiving, loving, and saving God whom we know in Jesus.

**Note:** Material drawn from Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible (T.H. Gaster), Volume 1, the Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 1 and some wording from Robert Longman, Jr. www. Spirithome.com copyright 1997-2003.

## What do Lutherans believe?

### A faith founded on good news

Lutherans are [Christians](#) who accept the teachings of Martin Luther (1483 – 1546). Luther was a German theologian who realized that there were significant differences between what he read in the Bible and the practices of the Roman Catholic church at that time. On October 31, 1517, he posted a challenge on the door of Wittenberg University, titled "95 Theses" (to debate 95 theological issues). His hope was that the church would reform its practice and preaching to be more consistent with the Word of God as contained in the Bible.

What started as an academic debate escalated into a distinct separation between the Roman Catholic church of the time and those who accepted Luther's suggested reforms. "Lutheran" became the name of the group that agreed with Luther's convictions.

Today, nearly five centuries later, Lutherans still celebrate the Reformation on October 31 and still hold to the basic principles of Luther's theological teachings, such as **Grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone**. These comprise the very essence of Lutheranism:

- We are saved by the **grace of God alone** -- not by anything we do;
- Our salvation is through **faith alone** -- we only need to trust God made known in Christ who promises us forgiveness, life and salvation; and
- The **Bible is the norm** for faith and life -- the true standard by which teachings and doctrines are to be judged.

Over the years, different Lutheran church bodies have been established and organized to meet the needs of Lutherans in communities and nations all over the world. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the largest Lutheran group in North America, founded in 1988 when three North American Lutheran church bodies united: The American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Lutheran Church in America. Learn more about the [History of the ELCA](#).

Lutherans are part of a reforming movement within the whole Christian church; as a part of practicing their faith, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its predecessors have engaged in ecumenical dialogue with other church bodies for decades. In fact, the ELCA has entered into cooperative "full communion" agreements (sharing common convictions about theology, mission and worship) with several other Protestant denominations, including

- the Moravian Church
- The Episcopal Church
- the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- the Reformed Church in America
- the United Church of Christ

The ELCA has an ongoing dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, and in 1999, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This represented a historic consensus on key issues of faith and called for further dialogue and study together.

To learn more about these ecumenical relationships, visit [Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations](#).

Lutheranism is a faith tradition that is open to all, regardless of background. The ELCA alone is almost five million members strong, with nearly 10,500 congregations across the U.S., Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. In fact, there's probably an ELCA congregation right in your community ([Find a congregation](#).) We welcome you to learn more about our church and find out how we can help you along life's path.

## Statements of Belief

Lutherans believe in the Triune God. God created and loves all of creation -- the earth and the seas and all of the world's inhabitants. We believe that God's Son, Jesus Christ, transforms lives through his death on the cross and his new life, and we trust that God's Spirit is active in the world.

We are part of God's unfolding plan. When we gather for worship, we connect with believers everywhere. When we study the Bible or hear God's word in worship, we are drawn more deeply into God's own saving story.

The convictions shared by Christians from many different traditions are expressed in statements of belief called creeds.

These ecumenical creeds that Lutherans affirm and use in worship confess the faith of the church through the ages and around the world.

The [Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) is part of our founding [constitution](#). The ELCA accepts the following creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church:

- [The Apostles' Creed](#)
- [The Nicene Creed](#)
- [The Athanasian Creed](#)

## ELCA Confession of Faith

### What we believe in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

- This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe
  - Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
  - The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
  - The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.
- This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.
- This church accepts the [Apostles'](#), [Nicene](#), and [Athanasian](#) Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church.
- This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it In faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.
- This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.
- This church confesses the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scriptures and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world.

*The Confession of Faith is published in the [Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#).*



# Salvation

## **Claims of the Church**

Since its beginning, based on New Testament texts, Christianity has made an exclusive claim: Jesus Christ is God's only Son, sent to redeem the world. This claim has fueled, throughout history, innumerable mission endeavors aimed at proclaiming the Gospel message in order to "save" human beings who have not heard the story of salvation, who have often come to be called the "heathen" ("And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" [Acts 4:12] and "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed ... have never heard ... without someone to proclaim him...?" [Romans 10:14-15 ]).

In turn, these efforts have raised questions such as, "What about those who never heard, did not believe, weren't reached, had no opportunity to hear the Gospel?" and "Will only Christians be saved?"

The traditional medieval response followed Pope Boniface VIII's 1302 pronouncement, "There is no salvation outside the Church." Protestants were later to reject that claim and substitute an evangelical version of exclusiveness: "Apart from faith there is no salvation." Of course, this faith would come only from being baptized into the Christian faith upon hearing the claims of the preached Gospel. However, both Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants provided various "loophole" theologies. There were second chances for those of "invincible ignorance" (Roman Catholic), or those "not accountable," e.g. infants, mentally retarded, etc. (evangelical Protestantism). Others would assert that Jesus — the valid avenue for Christians — is only one of many ways that lead to the God of the universe, and that other religions possess equally valid paths to God.

## **Expanding our concept of Jesus the Christ**

Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten asserts that all of these views are based on a defective understanding of the New Testament. He says that, though we can confess with St. Paul, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:19-20), those who limit God's redemption by exclusivity or loopholes, or who place Christ in a pantheon of world saviors, demonstrate that, "Their thinking about Christ is too small." Braaten acknowledges that, "In answer to John the Baptist's question, 'Are you the one who is to come?' the Good News answer is 'yes, and we need not look for another.'" He writes, "Nothing is more certain in the New Testament than its intention to picture Jesus in an utterly exclusive way, making this claim the heart of the Gospel, itself." However, he casts the exclusivity of this claim in the way ELCA Lutherans approach all theological questions – by understanding God's grace, God's action in Christ.

Braaten says, "The Christian hope for salvation, whether for the believing few or the unbelieving many, is grounded in the person and meaning of Christ alone, not in the potential of the world's religions to save, nor in the moral seriousness of humanists

and people of good will, not even in the good works of pious Christians and church people.... There is a universalist thrust in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's theology. How else can we read passages such as 'for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1 Cor 15:22)?" (See also Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 1:9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:28.)

### **The universal scope of salvation in Christ**

ELCA Lutherans will say with Braaten, "Salvation in the New Testament is what God has done to death in the resurrection of Jesus. Salvation is what God has in store for you and me and the whole world in spite of death, solely on account of the living risen Christ. ... The universal scope of salvation in Christ includes the destiny of our bodies together with the whole earth and the whole of creation. This cosmic hope is based on the promise of eternal life sealed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Through raising Jesus from the dead, God put death to death, overcoming the deadliest enemy of life at loose in the world. This hope for the final salvation of humanity and the eternal universal restitution of all things in heaven and on earth ... is drawn from the unlimited promise of the Gospel and the magnitude of God's grace made known to the world through Christ."

But what of faith? Isn't faith necessary for salvation? ELCA Lutherans can say with Braaten, "To say we are saved by faith alone means we let God-in-Christ do all the saving that needs to be done, apart from any works we can perform.... If I confess that God has saved me, a lost and condemned sinner, whom else can he not save? Faith is precisely awareness that God's accepting love reaches out to all sinners, even to me. Faith is the opening of heart and mind to the universal grace and goodness of God."

For ELCA Lutherans, Braaten's words ring true: "The special quality of Jesus' uniqueness is best grasped in terms of his universal meaning. This concrete person, Jesus of Nazareth, is unique because of his unequaled universal significance. The point of his uniqueness underlines his universality. If Jesus is the Lord and Savior, he is the universal Lord and Savior, not merely my personal Lord and Savior. Because Jesus is the unique and universal Savior, there is a large hope for salvation, not only for me and others with the proper credentials of believing and belonging to the church, but for all people whenever or wherever they might have lived and no matter how religious or irreligious they may have proved to be themselves. It is clearly God's announced will that all people shall be saved and come to the knowledge of truth (1 Timothy 2:4)."

### **God's grace and love made known to all in Jesus**

The New Testament is full of warnings about substituting right words and doctrines as religious screens against the living word and will of God. Still, these warnings are not God's last word. The final word is that God came to the world in Christ in order to redeem the world, and that nothing can come between God's creation (which includes human beings) and God's all-encompassing love. That is precisely how ELCA Lutherans understand Jesus' claim that, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Quotations from Carl Braaten, *The Universal Meaning of Jesus Christ*, *LCA Partners Magazine*, December, 1980 and June, 1981.

Biblical quotations from the *New Revised Standard Version*

## Sin and forgiveness

### **Original sin and its aftermath**

In the book of Genesis and throughout the Bible, sin is shown to be in opposition to God's creative intent. The Garden of Eden story depicts a time without sin and before the man and woman are tempted by agents outside themselves. It tells us that, although humankind has the power to resist temptation, we yield to it because we want something that is not ours. We want to be like God (Genesis 3:5). What we discover in yielding to temptation is that we see only our naked rebellion.

Genesis 4-11 depicts how sin, once entering into the world, spreads until it corrupts all flesh (Genesis 6:12). We also confront God's grace in these chapters. The salvation of Noah, his family, and the other creatures in the ark foreshadows how God will thereafter respond to human sin by being true to God's righteous nature. God will reach out to save us from our self-destructive ways. Lutherans teach that "... since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin." For ELCA Lutherans, the term "original sin" connotes that sin is "original" to humanity and is the "base line" for the sinful things all people do. From this human condition — demonstrable in our persistent desire to get out from under God's authority — come sins of disobedience which further fracture God's intent for creation. ELCA Lutherans, therefore, recognize that sin is reality; we are confronted by it on all sides. We know sin because we are sinful. We experience its results in powers, actions, words, and deeds that range in scope from the enormity of unspeakable social atrocities to our own daily selfish and deceitful manipulation of creation, people, and events.

### **Luther, St. Paul, and a Lutheran understanding**

Martin Luther believed that the law is written in everyone's heart and that each person hears the voice of her/his conscience. He pointed out, however, that we only come truly to understand the power and scope of sin through God's Word.

Confronted with God's external Word (Law), we see that sin is lodged in the heart, and that its deepest nature "... is ultimately unbelief, the lack of trust in God, the absence of love for God. ... Thus sin is the desire to set oneself in place of God, not allowing God to be one's God."

ELCA Lutherans believe that, while sin is part and parcel of our being human, each person is also responsible for his/her own sins. We come to God knowing that we need forgiveness, and in the Gospel we experience the good news that God has chosen to repair our brokenness. Sinners though we are, in repentance we discover God's forgiveness already reaching out to us even before our confession comes to our lips.

Much of what ELCA Lutherans attest to regarding sin and forgiveness comes from St. Paul. In the first half of his Letter to the Romans, he tells us that sin comes from the

refusal to recognize God, that all have sinned (Romans 2:23), and that sin is the human condition. For Paul,

- sin is a power, the seat of which is in our flesh
- we are so enslaved by sin that we are unable to do what is right even when we wish it
- human beings lack the resource to deliver themselves from this slavery
- the "wages" of sin is death.

Paradoxically, St. Paul points out that because death is the effect of sin, it is death that overcomes it - that is, the death of Jesus Christ. While Christians share his death, the good news is that they also share his resurrection. Christ is the firstborn of the dead. That is, Christ goes before us first in death and then in resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). Forgiveness of all sin comes ultimately by dying with Christ to sin and being raised with him to new life (Romans 6:1-13).

### **Forgiveness through Christ**

Believing this, and accepting the new life God spontaneously and graciously offers us through Christ, allows forgiveness to flow into our lives, renews our relationships with God and others, and assures us of God's love despite our sin. We are like the prodigal (and for all practical purposes dead) child who is lavishly welcomed and forgiven in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). God's promise of gracious forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection makes our repentance and confession possible. In this, we pass through death to new life. Luther wrote that faith is trust in God's grace alone and that "This faith is possible only as a response to the divine word of forgiveness" and grows from a daily rhythm of drowning the old sinful self in the waters of our Baptism so that God can raise up the new self in Christ.

This New Testament proclamation that God's free, grace-filled gift of forgiveness comes through Christ is the new good news. Jesus himself claimed and exercised the power to forgive sins. Furthermore, ELCA Lutherans understand that forgiveness comes not only through Christ's personal forgiveness but also is made available through his redeeming death. His sacrifice of self to sin is recalled in Christian worship in the sacramental "words of institution" of Holy Communion recorded in Matthew 26:27-28.

### **Forgiveness in the church**

Jesus conferred the authority to forgive sins on his 12 disciples as they received the Holy Spirit (symbolized by his breathing on them in John 20:21-23). They were empowered to perform the kind of forgiving act described in Mark 2:5 ff. So it is that forgiveness from sin is also gained through the prayers of the New Testament Church (I John 5:15 ff). ELCA Lutherans believe that this empowerment formally to convey God's forgiveness continues wherever Christ's Church exists. As a corollary to God's forgiveness, ELCA Lutherans believe that all Christians have been given the responsibility of forgiving another's sins against them (Matthew 6:14, Mark 11:25, Luke 17:3ff).

We understand that the Church is called to be Christ's living body on earth. Though imperfect, it exists to witness to Christ and proclaim God's intended salvation for

humankind. Through proclamation of God's Law we rediscover our sinful self and are called again to repentance. Through the proclamation of God's Gospel, in our Baptism, and through receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion (Eucharist), we are both reminded of God's loving forgiveness and, through faith, are able to respond to God's forgiving word. We often find this assurance most intensely demonstrated during worship in a corporate public confession of sin, or through private confession,\* where we pray that the Holy Spirit will cleanse our hearts and we ask to be turned from sin in order to live for God alone. Upon our confession of sin, the pastor, with Christ's authorization, declares:

In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. – *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 96.

\* God's forgiving character is also commonplace in the Old Testament, as are prayers for forgiveness. Hosea 14:2 explicitly mentions as conditions for forgiveness, confession of sin, conversion from sin, and prayer for forgiveness. We see similar elements in Psalm 32:1-5, Isaiah 55:7, Jeremiah 14:20, 36:3, etc. Thus, for ELCA Lutherans, confessing one's sins as a step toward forgiveness and as mentioned explicitly in Acts of the Apostles 19:18 and 1 John 1:9 is an important element of regular worship.

*The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2000 and Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, Fortress Press, 1999.

## Righteousness

Unfortunately, common English usage of righteous/righteousness often usurps the Biblical understanding and its key role in perceiving God's righteous relationship to humankind. Therefore we must first say that ELCA Lutherans do not equate righteousness with being piously moral, as implied in such comments as, "Oh, s/he is sooo righteous!" nor with the pious self-assurance of one's own moral rightness commonly inferred from the term self-righteousness.

Rather, we understand the concept from its biblical usage, beginning with the Old Testament root word for righteous (sedeq-sedaqa) which is used in connection with God's saving action. The Old Arabic meaning (keep faith with) suggests fulfilling an obligation. As a noun, righteousness may be translated as right/due/truth, and as an adjective, proper/appropriate. For early Judaism it implied faithfulness.

### **God's righteousness in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures, righteousness is the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether with God or between human beings. When those demands are fulfilled, the relationship is right. When one (God, man or woman)

fulfills the conditions imposed by a relationship, s/he is, in Old Testament terms, righteous.

God's righteousness is most particularly seen in God's fulfillment of the relationship initiated by God with God's people, Israel. Israel constantly appeals to God's righteousness for deliverance (e.g. Psalms 5:8 and 31:1). Thus, God's righteous judgments are saving judgments. God's salvation of Israel is God's righteousness, the faithful fulfillment of God's covenant with her. Though Israel often fails to keep the covenant and therefore is unrighteous, God's righteousness persists.

### **God's righteousness in the New Covenant**

Righteousness in the New Testament continues and builds upon the Old Testament understanding. The New Testament presumes a covenant relationship which needs the active participation of both covenant partners. Those acts which preserve a covenant relationship are righteous, while those which break the relationship are unrighteous.

Hence,

- God's righteousness is most clearly demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Christ, in which God upheld and restored the covenant relationship with sinful humanity
- following this watershed event, humankind's righteousness consists of a trusting acceptance of the restored relationship we experience through God's saving act in Christ

Thus, ELCA Lutherans underscore that righteousness is a relational concept. Humankind has broken the relationship with God, but God restores it in Christ. God's action in Christ upholds God's relationship with us by providing the relational outcome that both God and we seek - that is, our salvation.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament also uses the words righteous and unrighteous to describe preserving or breaking a relationship between human beings (cf. Jesus' words, Luke 16:1 ff). Actions which meet responsibilities to uphold those relationships are called righteous, those that rupture relationships are termed unrighteous.

### **God in Christ**

ELCA Lutherans believe that God is the sole source of righteousness through Christ. Upholding the covenant relationship depends solely upon God, since we, in our sin, continually fracture the relationship. ELCA Lutherans trust the New Testament witness that God has elected to restore and maintain the covenant relationship with sinful humankind. Similarly, we rely on our relationship with Christ to define our relationships with others, meaning that these should be relationships of compassion, service and self-giving.

Since the Bible understands righteousness to be primarily a relational term, conformity to a moral norm is not and cannot be its main meaning. While morality and righteousness are related in the New Testament, righteousness is fundamentally more concerned with humanity's broken and restored relationship to God - and how

that affects our relationship with others — than it is with moral shortcomings and ethical ideals (e.g. Galatians 3:6). Knowing our sinful human nature which renders moral purity impossible, Jesus was most concerned to call people to a relationship of repentance and trust in God. He himself is called righteous, not because his acts conform to a moral norm (Luke 7:34), but because, by his obedient sacrificial death, he brings us into a new right relationship with God. Thus Jesus, not our moral acts, is our source of righteousness; it is he through whom we are in relationship with God.

### **Cruciform righteousness**

Righteousness is "cruciform" in that it comes to us in the shape and shadow of the cross. In Christ's crucifixion, ELCA Lutherans see the twofold aspect of God's righteousness:

- God, by this sacrifice and saving action, takes upon himself (sic) our own human death, thus upholding the promised covenant relationship which is our salvation. In fulfilling the covenant demand to uphold the relationship, God is proved righteous/faithful (Romans 3:26a).
- At the same time, because Christ's sacrifice on the cross is a supreme act of obedience to God's will, Christ fulfills for us the demand of the covenant relationship on us, which is obedience to God. The relationship is restored for human beings and, by participating in this relationship, we, with God's help, are able to respond in righteous living — confessing our sinful failures, but giving thanks for God's forgiveness and looking always to God in Christ as our righteousness as we relate to other people (e.g., Matthew 5:20).

Thus, for ELCA Lutherans, while right living comes from righteousness, righteousness comes from God alone. Because God in Christ has been righteous both for himself and for us, we are freed, in the words of Martin Luther, to be "little Christ's" for our neighbor. This means that we may faithfully live out our relationship with God as we work at living in a right (i.e., Christlike) relationship with God's whole creation.

*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*  
*Anchor Bible Dictionary*