

**The Gift of Faith:
Given and Received**

With Special Applications to:
Infants
People With Mental Retardation
Victims of Alzheimer's Disease

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The Gift Of Faith: Given And Received

(With Special Application To Infants, the Mentally Retarded, and Alzheimer's Victims)

The concept of *faith* holds an important place in most of the world's religious systems. The definition of faith, however, varies widely. Even those who claim to adhere to the teachings of the bible often find themselves disagreeing on the exact meaning of the term. Such disagreements are not caused by the difficulty of the biblical text as much as by the refusal of the interpreter to accept the text and context. History shows that human reason has often been the greatest opponent of the biblical concept of faith. It has repeatedly managed to take a beautiful gift from God and turn it into something which man produces to earn God's favor.

When we speak of the biblical concept of faith, we are referring to what is usually called *saving faith*, that faith which connects a sinful human being to his God and receives the free blessings of forgiveness and salvation from God through Christ. This most unique concept of faith differs from the pagan idea. For instance, the ancient Romans and Greeks spoke and wrote of a *faith in the gods* which merely recognized that certain deities exist, and which accepted their power and supernatural influence. They never used the expression to mean personal trust in divine favor and mercy. Saving faith is personal confidence in God and the blessings he gives to us freely through Christ. It accepts God's gifts and takes possession of them.

The bible does use the term *faith* in other ways when it speaks of the *faithfulness* or *trustworthiness* of God (Rom.3:3). It speaks of the trustworthiness of man (Gal.5:22) and of faith in temporal blessings (Rom. 4:16 ff.), both of which are fruits of saving faith. It also speaks of *the faith* in an objective sense, referring to the entire body of Christian doctrine (Jude 3). It even speaks of *devil faith*, a mere knowledge of God possessed by satanic spirits, which is far removed from saving faith (James 2:19).

Our Lutheran Confessions do not contain separate sections on the subject of faith. Our forefathers did full justice to the subject in the articles treating the subject of justification and free will, since this was the central thought of most doctrinal discussions during the Reformation period. The errors in the church that persisted then still haunt us today in a variety of forms. The emphasis on *decision* and *personal experience* in much of modern theology as well as the continued eroding influence of *rationalism* demands a continued and careful biblical study of saving faith, its nature, and its effects.

The Necessity of Faith

Christianity is a unique religion of grace and faith that differs from all other religions in the world. Other religions have as the object of faith the laws and moral codes of their gods. Christianity presents God's free grace and forgiveness through Christ as the object. The necessity of grace and the faith to apprehend it goes back to the beginning of time when God created man in his own image, a rational being with a soul, a heart and a mind. He enabled his special creature to think, to reason, to make decisions, to feel emotions, to express emotions, to communicate, and more. It was God's great joy to communicate with this new creature. He

bestowed on him the ability to receive this communication. God shared words of love and joy with Adam and Eve and promised great blessings to them. Their fellowship was close and mankind's joy was complete.

This fellowship was broken when man violated the bond with God and fell from perfection with a mighty crash. He brought on himself and his world the curse of separation from the only source of life. He contaminated his body, soul, and mind with evil that rendered him helpless and afraid of God. With great love that was in no way deserved, God stepped forward to rescue his fallen creature. He communicated with him, calling him to account and then promising him a Rescuer who would destroy the powerful being that had pulled him away from God. Fellowship and communication was restored with man, but on a different level. It would be possible through the coming Champion. All of mankind's hopes clung to this promise. Man clung to this promise in faith, for a promise by its very nature demands faith.

God continued to communicate this promise in various forms throughout the centuries until the Champion, the Son of God himself, was sent to fulfill them. Christ lived and died to pay for all the imperfections of man so that God was able to declare all mankind *not guilty*. Fellowship with the Giver of Life was now officially restored, and man would receive the benefits of that fellowship through faith. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16). The Savior commissioned his immediate and future disciples to communicate this good news to other people and nations by teaching and baptizing them in the name of the God who had rescued them. He told them that *whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned* (Mark 16:16). Man's would take possession of these free blessings through faith even while he lived in a sin-contaminated world. Faith would anticipate going home to heaven, where the lost image of God, would be completely restored. God would give the necessary faith to receive it all. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast* (Ephesians 2:9).

The New Testament Greek terms, which God uses more than 400 times to communicate the ideas of *believe* and *faith*, are πιστεύειν and πίστις, derived from πείθω, *I persuade*. The etymology of the terms rules out all manner of uncertainty and doubt. The Old Testament has a variety of Hebrew roots which convey the ideas of trust and confidence. The *Septuagint* usually employs forms of πιστεύειν to translate the Old Testament terms *aman* (אמן) and *emunah* (אמונה), which emphasize *truthfulness* and *trust*. Another term for trust in the Old Testament is *bathach* (בטח), which means *to rely on* or *lean upon*. This is the root used in Habakkuk 2:4, *The righteous will live by his faith*. The Old Testament frequently refers to saving faith under its peculiar aspects of trust, steadfastness, and hope. Even the *fear of God*, so often designated as the characteristic attribute of God's children, is but another name for saving faith. (Schaller, p. 131)

In the order of salvation, faith is always the instrument, or the *appropriating organ*, that receives the blessing. It is not a meritorious work that earns something. The New Testament indicates this relation in three distinct ways by the Greek syntax. Twice we read the dative of

instrument (τῆ πίστεϊ) as in Romans 3:23, *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith . . .* With great frequency the phrase ἐκ πίστεως appears, which literally signifies *out of faith*, as in Romans 1:17, . . . *a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous shall live by faith."* The most instructive expression, however, is the phrase formed with the preposition διὰ, *by or through*, with the genitive denoting instrumentality (διὰ πίστεως) as in Galatians 2:16, . . . *a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.* From these observations it is altogether misleading to call faith a *cause* of salvation or justification. *For faith justifies and saves, not on the ground that it is a work in itself worthy, but only because it receives the promised mercy.* (*Apology IV, Triglotta, p. 137*)

Although the bible nowhere gives a formal definition of faith, it does tell us that an essential attribute of faith is *trust* in God's declarations and promises. *Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.* (Heb. 11:1) At the same time faith is so closely associated with *knowledge* and *assent* that the bible often employs these terms to designate or describe faith. *Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.* (John 17:3) *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20:31) *Trust* has its source in the emotions of man, *knowledge* proceeds from the intellect, and *assent* is a product of the will. All three functions of trusting, knowing and willing are closely interwoven in the act of faith. The emotions, the intellect and the will together grasp the Gospel, although trust is the primary factor.

We must be careful, however, not to equate faith only with knowledge of the intellect, or only with the assent of the will. A person may know that Jesus Christ lived on this earth (historical faith) and may even accept the fact that he was the Savior of mankind, but might not trust in him for personal salvation. *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that -- and shudder.* (James 2:19) Genuine saving faith is personal and takes direct hold on the gift of salvation for the believer. Christ died for ME as well as for the whole world.

But that faith which justifies is not merely a knowledge of history, [not merely this, that I know the stories of Christ's birth, suffering, etc. (that even the devils know,)] but it is to assent to the promise of God, in which for Christ's sake, the remission of sins and justification are freely offered. [It is the certainty or the certain trust in the heart, when, with my whole heart, I regard the promises of God as certain and true, through which there are offered me, without my merit, the forgiveness of sins, grace, and all salvation, through Christ the Mediator.] (*Apology IV, Triglotta, p. 135*)

How Faith Is Given

If God were to offer forgiveness, eternal life and all the other blessings that go with them without giving the gift of faith to receive them, these gifts would go unused by human hearts, minds and hands. The bible makes it quite clear that man is totally helpless when it comes to producing the faith needed to apprehend God's gifts. As a matter of fact he is downright *dead* in such matters. *You were dead in your transgressions and sins . . .* (Eph. 2:1) As a rock cannot lift itself up to walk off the field, so a human being cannot reach out to grasp God's gracious favor.

Not only is man helpless, but he is also hostile toward God. His fallen nature wants to strike out against him and everything he stands for. *The sinful mind is hostile to God.* (Rom. 8:7) Fallen man dares to call God's great gifts of love *foolishness*. *The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.* . . . (I Cor. 1:18) The *opinion of the law* is so ingrained in our corrupt nature that the gift of forgiveness and life appears as pure nonsense to our intellect, will and emotions.

Therefore the Scriptures deny to the intellect, heart, and will of natural man all aptness, skill, capacity, and ability to think, to understand, to be able to do, to begin, to will, to undertake, to act, to work or to concur in working anything good and right in spiritual things as of himself. . . . God's Word testifies, that the intellect, heart, and will of the natural, unregenerate man in divine things are not only turned entirely away from God, but also turned and perverted against God to every evil; also, that he is not only weak, incapable, unfit, and dead to good, but also is so lamentably perverted, infected, and corrupted by original sin that he is entirely evil, perverse, and hostile to God by his disposition and nature, and that he is exceedingly strong, alive, and active with respect to everything that is displeasing and contrary to God. (Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration II, Triglotta, pp. 885, 886)

If man is to receive and benefit from the beautiful gifts from heaven, he must also be given the faith to do so. God does exactly that. The instrument which he uses to give his gifts is the same instrument that conveys the gift of faith, the gospel. The very nature of faith, which is confidence in the gospel, would force the conclusion that faith is begotten only by the preaching of the gospel. Jesus told his disciples in John 6 that his words are Spirit and life, namely, that they are filled with the Spirit who creates new life in the heart. In his high priestly prayer Jesus mentions the fact that his word caused his disciples to receive, to know, and to believe the word, and that passing this word on to future generations would have the same effect on other listeners (John 17: 8, 17, 20). Paul claims the same power for his Gospel in Romans 1:16: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.* He also refers to the *word of faith*, namely, the word which is the instrumental cause of faith (Rom. 10:8, 17). Peter declares that the gospel as preached is the divine instrument of the new birth: *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. . . . and this is the word that was preached to you.* (I Peter 1: 23, 25)

God not only conveys faith through his spoken gospel, but also through the visible form of the gospel which we call the *sacraments*, those special sacred acts which Christ instituted for his people. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper employ the visible elements of water, bread, and wine together with the word to grant forgiveness and other spiritual benefits to the recipient. While the Lord's Supper was given by Jesus more for confirming faith, than for producing it, it is possible that an unbeliever coming to communion could be converted to faith in his Savior there because of the presence of the gospel. (Schaller, p. 159)

As for baptism Titus 3:5 is explicit: *He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.* The Hebraistic idiom used here by Paul describes the washing of baptism as the means

by which the Holy Ghost works regeneration and renewal. Similar words are used by Jesus in speaking to Nicodemus: *No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.* The same relation between baptism and faith is observed in Galatians 3:26-27: *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* Baptism never works faith in a magical sort of way, but always through the word of God.

The gospel gives the sinner a safe refuge as the law of God threatens him with the fire pit of hell. The object of saving faith is always Christ. Faith cannot exist without an object. Faith can have false objects such as God's law, one's own righteousness, a man-made god, good feelings, philosophy, tradition, error, or even faith itself. Such faith is not saving faith, for it does not cling to that which can save. One of our forefathers said that the best sermons on faith don't even mention the word. They merely proclaim the object of faith, Christ crucified. The Holy Spirit uses that object to produce the necessary faith in the heart of the listener. Luther summarized these points well in his explanation of the Third Article: *I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him: But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.*

How the Gift of Faith Is Received

The bestowal of saving faith on a sinful human being is usually called *conversion*. Other terms such as *regeneration, illumination, and sanctification* (in the larger sense) are used to describe this miraculous turning around from unbelief to faith, a movement from death to life. There has been much discussion and argument over the process of conversion in an attempt to describe just what takes place in the human heart at the time God reaches it with the gospel. Any attempt to use psychological observation or introspection to discern the truth will be futile, because we are dealing with a divine miracle that is beyond the grasp of human reason. The psychologist can note only natural expressions which will vary from individual to individual, but he cannot get at the heart of the matter. The bible gives no systematic analysis of conversion, but it does make significant comments which throw light on the subject.

The bible speaks of distinct *motions* or *movements* which occur in the heart at conversion. Contrition is the alarm which the sinner feels when he has learned to recognize his sin from the law of God. This terror of conscience is not of any merit by itself as we see in the case of Judas. When the gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit implants true faith in God's gracious promises of forgiveness. The sinner is converted and finds rest and relief for his troubled soul and conscience (Wente, p. 179).

For this is certainly true that in genuine conversion a change, new emotion [renewal], and movement in the intellect, will, and heart must take place, namely, that the heart perceive sin, dread God's wrath, turn from sin, perceive and accept the promise of grace in Christ, have good spiritual thoughts, a Christian purpose and diligence, and strive against the flesh. For where none of these occurs or is present, there is also no true conversion. (Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration II, Triglotta, p. 909)

The bible says that *faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.* (Rom 10:17) Just what is man's role in the reception of the gift of faith and in these movements of the heart, if any? Can man only come to faith if he is physically able to hear the message of the gospel? Does the inward reception of the gift of faith depend on the proper functioning of the body's senses? Must one reach a certain level of intelligence and emotional maturity before one can believe? What about infants and those whose senses and minds have been dulled or disabled by disease and injury? And then there is the question that lays a heavy cross upon the theologian's shoulder, *If God has saved all and creates the faith in the heart to receive salvation, why do some believe and others do not?* In seeking answers to these questions we must always go back to the basic scriptural premise that man is helpless to believe and that God gives him the faith to do so through his gospel.

The bible indicates that faith is seated in the heart of man. Paul prays in Ephesians that *Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith* (Eph. 3:17). He designates the faith in the heart as the internal characteristic of the Christian, just as oral confession is its external characteristic. *For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved* (Rom. 10:10). The *heart* in this sense is the inmost core of the human personality, the center of soul life, that which determines the real character of the individual. We recognize the *heart* as the seat of our emotions, which are affected by the intellect and also influence the will. It becomes apparent that the bible represents saving faith as an emotion which colors and influences all conscious and unconscious states of the human soul (Schaller, p. 136).

Wherefore that faith of which the Apostles speak is not idle knowledge, but a reality, receiving the Holy Ghost and justifying us [not a mere knowledge of history, but a strong powerful work of the Holy Ghost, which changes hearts.] (Apology, Art. IV, Triglotta, p. 151)

It would appear then that the soul is the recipient of God's gift of faith. The well known words of Psalm 23:3 tell us that God *restores my soul*. God changes a dead and fallen soul into a living soul that is most intimately bound together with the body and makes its reactions felt in the body. At creation man was not only given life like the animals, but that he was also given this special soul. It is this soul, this spiritual, rational, immortal being which really constitutes man's conscious personality. The essence of the soul is not susceptible to scientific analysis and investigation. Reputable scientists and psychologists will not deny the reality of life, but many will deny the reality of the soul and speak only of states and processes of consciousness, which are themselves a mystery (E. Koehler, *A Christian Pedagogy*, p. 83). Dogmaticians often divide the activity of the soul into three parts: the intellect (cognition), the emotions, and the will (volition), all three parts being involved in the act of believing.

Faith is the assurance and confidence of the heart in those invisible and spiritual things promised to us by god in His Word and Gospel. the believer not only knows the promises of his God, but there is in his heart an emotional response; they affect him; he wants them, lays hold of them, and applies them to his personal need. (E. Koehler, A Summary of Christian Doctrine, p. 139)

Although faith can be described as an activity performed by the human intellect, will and emotions, it is still the complete work of God. *It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose* (Phil. 2:13). Man plays no other part than that of the subject which is to be converted. The human will is not active towards producing faith and conversion, but only experiences it. Man does not assist in his conversion, but remains purely passive because of his condition after the fall into sin. Jesus told his listeners, *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, . . .* (John 6:43).

The question is often asked whether conversion is instant or gradual. Conversion takes place when the despairing sinner becomes a rejoicing believer in Christ. As soon as the penitent sinner possesses the first spark of faith, or even the longing for faith, he is converted. It is instantaneous. One may speak of gradual conversion if they include certain outward acts which precede conversion such as a historical understanding of the gospel, a conviction of guilt, and terrors of the conscience. But these are all within the power and reach of unregenerate man. There is no middle state between conversion and non-conversion, belief and unbelief. Some Christians may know the approximate moment of conversion, as did the apostle Paul. For others it may be like the seed in Mark 4:27: *Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.* It is not essential that we know exactly when we were converted. It is important that we know we have been converted, and this we can only know by relying on the object and foundation of faith, the sure promises of God (Wente, pp. 180-181).

The bible also describes faith as a *state*, as a continued possession of the gifts and blessings of God received at conversion. We are to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith (II Cor. 13:5). We read of those who *continue in faith* (I Tim. 2:15) and those who are *strengthened in the faith* (Col. 2:7). Paul said of himself, *I have kept the faith* (II Tim. 4:7), and Jesus said of Peter as a crisis approached, *I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail* (Luke 22:32). This state of faith, or state of grace, continues even in a state of unconsciousness, profound sleep, coma, the delirium of fever, or under the surgeon's anesthesia. The Savior actually *dwells in your hearts through faith* (Eph. 3:17) and that faith continues to hold on to all the treasures of his redeeming love, whether we are awake or asleep. (Wilson, pp. 205-206)

God's grace can be resisted by man. There are some who hear the gospel and do not believe. Jesus is speaking of Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37: *How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.* The unbelief was not caused by God's inability to create faith, but by man's refusal to accept God's gracious invitation. The same situation is found among Stephen's hearers as he accuses them: *You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers; You always resist the Holy Spirit!* (Acts 7:51) Again the fault lies with the man who resists God's grace. Jesus speaks about the unforgivable sin of *blasphemy against the Spirit* in Matthew 12:31. This sin of hardened unbelief is *unforgivable* because it shuts out what it needs most, the free forgiveness that God extends to it.

How then can some believe and others not believe when it is God who saves all and creates the faith in the heart to accept that salvation? Human logic will not answer this mystery. We do not try to reconcile the two teachings, but we simply believe both of them. In the same vein the bible teaches that when we are brought to faith it is because of God's eternal election (Eph. 1:6), but when people are lost it is because of their own stubborn unbelief. We'll have to wait until heaven for the answers to such mysteries.

Faith Grows and Acts

The smallest and weakest spark of faith is saving faith because it clings to the saving promises of God, but faith is capable of growth with continued exposure to the means of grace. Abraham was *strong in faith* (Rom. 4:20) and others are described as *weak in faith* (Rom. 14:1). Jesus reproved his disciples for being *of little faith* (Matt. 6:30). While they had every reason to be secure in the presence of their Lord, they were still fearful and terrified. A father crying out for Jesus to help his demon-possessed son, recognized the weakness of his own faith when he said, *I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief* (Mark 9:24).

Conversion is an ongoing process after it once occurs, for faith needs to grow in the intensity of its grip on God's promises. Although the believer's name is written in the Book of Life, he must daily fight a battle with the sinful flesh that still lingers inside. The ongoing struggle on this side of heaven, is *not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms* (Eph. 6:12). For this reason we all need to become strong in the Lord and *like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation* (I Pet. 2:2).

As faith grows through the power of the Holy Spirit, working through the means of grace, it saturates and affects the whole being of the believer. Paul's prayer for the Ephesian believer is *that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge -- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (Eph. 3:17). Although we are to remain as little children in trust, we are to grow in knowledge. The reasoning ability which God gave us is enlightened and made captive to God's word through faith. It becomes useful for comprehending, organizing, and teaching the truth and for defending against error. The temperament and nature which God gave us is also illuminated by faith as it grows.

The production of good works in the believer's life is an unailing effect of growing faith. We call it *sanctification* in the narrow sense. *For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life* (I Thess. 4:7). Voluntary compliance with the will of God is a Spirit-worked fruit of faith. Faith produces love which directs its activities toward God and man. Another effect of faith is that it begins to consciously recognize itself, enabling the believer to examine himself to see whether he is in the faith (II Cor. 13:5). We must be careful to distinguish such conscious recognition (*reflex faith*), from actual saving faith (*direct faith*). Jesus reminds us of the

unlimited potential of a growing faith when he tells his disciples, *I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there" and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you* (Matt. 17:20). God also shows us what a growing faith can accomplish by the examples of the faith heroes in Hebrews 11.

The bible warns us that it is possible to lose one's faith and to fall from grace. Some of the causes given are spiritual starvation by neglecting the means of grace; self-righteousness that trusts in one's own merit; philosophic and rationalistic pride that will not submit to the authority of God's word; love of the world; willful sins against the conscience; and willful impenitence. Christ cautioned his disciples against any feelings of self security. Paul declared, *I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize* (I Cor. 9:27). We Christians therefore are admonished *to work out our salvation with fear and trembling* (Phil 2:12). Even if a Christian falls from grace, it is possible for him to be reconverted. Peter fell mightily on the night he denied his Lord, but Christ welcomed him back a few days later. It is not left to us to judge whether a person has committed the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit. We cannot see into the heart as God can. We give the lapsed Christian every benefit of the doubt and seek to bring him back with the word of God.

Heresies Through the Ages

As we said earlier, there has been much disagreement among bible students on the exact meaning of the term *faith* in the bible. Throughout history there have been those who deny entirely the corruptness of the human nature and think of it as fundamentally good, with only remnants of evil to be overcome through education and human development. Others have admitted a corruption, but only a partial one. They say that a spark of goodness remains which can be fanned into life to reach out to God. Most heresies make of faith a good work produced by man that has some meritorious value and earns God's favor.

Already in the early church at Galatia the Judaizers were teaching Christians that justification was by the law and that faith was not sufficient. A number of early church fathers (Justin, Tatian, Origen, Irenaeus, Tertullian) insisted on the freedom of man in some form or another to play a role in salvation. The greatest champion for this cause was the English monk, Pelagius (c. 360 - 420 A.D.), who denied the doctrine of original sin. He insisted on the ability of man to choose good and come to God. Augustine's renunciation of Pelagianism led to the predominance of semipelagianism that insisted on the necessity of grace, but also admitted a limited contribution from man.

The influence of Pelagianism and semipelagianism led to the teaching that man is free in the use of his will as a preparation for grace. Grace was seen more as a disposition in God that becomes active in man. By its infusion into man, man is restored. In such theology justification becomes a gradual process toward recovery (Renner, p. 6). The Roman church continues this error today, making faith a meritorious work of man that accepts the teachings of the church without actually knowing those teachings (*implicit faith*). Rome goes the extra step to officially damn anyone who believes or teaches that one is saved by faith alone:

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified, let him be anathema (Council of Trent, Sess. 6, Can. 12).

Luther and the Reformation rediscovered the bible's teaching of justification by faith without works. His writings emphasize the theme of *monergism*, that God alone works faith and conversion. This comes out most powerfully in his controversy with Erasmus where he repudiates any claim by man to a role in conversion. The debate about the role of man in conversion continued after Luther's death in what is called the *Synergistic Controversy*. Phillip Melancthon already in the 1530's was gradually deviating from Luther toward semipelagianism and the humanism of Erasmus when he spoke of the three concurring causes for conversion: *the word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the human will assenting to and not resisting the word of God*. (Renner, p. 9) The synergists said that under the stimulus of the word, even the unregenerate human will is able to embrace the grace of God. The bitter controversy raged on for many decades until the matter was settled for the Lutherans in the *Formula of Concord* in 1580

Since the *Formula of Concord*, an occasional subtle infiltration of synergism can be detected among Lutherans in the various terms that have been used when speaking of faith and conversion. *Calvinism* championed the rigid doctrine of irresistible grace, claiming that there was an election to salvation and also an election to damnation. Even more influential has been the *Arminian* doctrine which teaches that faith is an act of man on account of which God is willing to confer remission of sins and the reward of eternal life. This rationalistic error prevails in most non-Calvinistic sects of the Reformed Church. *Pietism* tended to emphasize individual sins and to see holiness as evidence of conversion. *Methodism* in England borrowed much of its conversion theology from Luther, but could find no essential place for baptism. Its adherents placed heavy emphasis on feelings as a sign of conversion. Synergism has lived on in one form or another in Protestant theology causing gross disfigurement of the doctrines of faith and conversion (Renner, p. 12).

At the turn of the century, liberalism, aided by so called *enlightened reason*, undermined the authority of the bible more and more so that its central doctrines were robbed of their content and power. Instead of faith in Christ, man was vested with faith in man. The influence of science, psychology and a heaven-on-earth mindset did much to destroy any concern for the conversion of souls. What need is there for conversion when man is not really a sinner? Since the modern church has been dulling the word of God, her primary weapon of attack, an uncertain sound has been coming forth from her in many areas, including the doctrines of faith and conversion.

Even the more modern evangelistic movements which have sought to go back to the bible, such as the Billy Graham organization and the Charismatic Movement, are anchored in the old synergism. They emphasize making a conscious decision, or having a subjective experience, or feeling saved. They encourage us to *take Jesus into your heart* and make statements like, *All you have to do is believe*, which exaggerate the human element, and leave God anxiously waiting on the sidelines for someone to notice him. They tend to de-emphasize the importance of the means of grace, especially the sacraments, and stress a direct intervention of the Holy Spirit

(*Enthusiasm*). They push aside the object and foundation of faith and put faith itself into the limelight as the ultimate measurable human act that will gain God's favor. These modern evangelistic movements often leave one with the impression that *faith in faith* saves instead of faith in Christ.

Ironically, in spite of these abuses of God's means of grace and snubbing of the gift of faith, many of these erring groups still show a healthy respect for the bible. As long as the bible is read and taught, it will be difficult to completely hide the saving gospel and prevent the Holy Spirit from producing saving faith through it. Although the sacraments have been massacred with some of the interpretations given by the rationalists, if they are still administered according to Jesus instructions with the word of God, they can still be effective in conveying and confirming true saving faith. False teaching hinders and even destroys true faith, but if the gospel is still present in any form, the Spirit still can work the miracle. We are often left standing in awe at what God is able to accomplish in spite of man's bungling and failure to take him at his word.

Special Application: Infants

The depth of God's grace and the miraculous nature of faith are especially evident in the study of special cases, which Jesus would call *the least of his brothers*. The damage done by the erroneous interpretations of faith is brought out into the open when we apply them to the intellectually and emotionally immature or impaired. Consider the example of an infant child. The denial of infant faith is practically universal outside of the Lutheran Church. Only one argument is ever offered to support such denial: *infant faith is impossible!* No hint of biblical support is ever brought forth to support this claim; only the *reasonable* human deduction that anyone who lacks cognitive ability also lacks the ability to believe.

When faith is made to be an act produced by the human mind or will, then only those who are fully able to think clearly and feel deeply are able to have genuine faith. The Roman church has invented a distinction between *habitual* faith and *actual* faith. They say that God infuses faith into the child at baptism as a kind of tag, or safeguard, to secure the child's proper registration. Later on that faith becomes *real* faith when it becomes active in good works. A number of religious camps avoid the vexing question of infant faith by following the popular *holy innocents* theory, declaring that all infants are saved without the condition of faith. They preach an *age of accountability* when the child matures sufficiently to produce genuine faith to be saved. Another view that mirrors the Roman view is that a child has an *inclination to faith* which can be fanned into full-blown faith later on. Another view is that infants are saved by the faith of other persons, usually their parents or sponsors at baptism (*salvation by proxy*) (Schaller, p. 143).

Such teachings seem to automatically exclude a fair percentage of the human race from the classification of *believer*. Where does the bible ever tell us that some members of the human race are saved without faith? Where does it ever assume that infants are born innocent, without original sin, and are not in need of justification obtained through faith? Where does it ever

distinguish between age groups of Christians, chronological or mental, when it speaks of the curse of original sin, the need for forgiveness, and the need for saving faith? The bible drives home the point that *there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* (Rom. 3:23-24) It says that God loves the *world* and that *whoever believes* in his Son has eternal life. (John 3:16) Any exceptions made to the *all* and the *whoever* are not made by God. They are made by proud self-serving human minds that insist on telling the bible what it should say, instead of permitting the simple and clear meaning of the bible to lead them to a fuller understanding of God's grace.

So clear and so simple is the concept of faith that Jesus commends the faith of little children as exemplary. In Matthew 18 when the disciples want him to settle their self-serving questions about who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, he calls a little child (παῖδίον) to his side and says: *I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children (παῖδιά), you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven* (Matt. 18:3-4). The text uses the diminutive form of Greek word for *child*. The humble, unquestioning faith of the little child in the room was more commendable than the faith of the self-serving status-conscious disciples. In verse 6 Jesus goes on to say: *But if anyone causes one of these little ones (μικρῶν) who believe (πιστευόντων) in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.* Jesus implies here (also in Luke 17:2) that these tiny, little, insignificant ones can also have faith, and their faith is not to be taken lightly. Mark 9 records the same incident using the same terms.

In Luke 18 people bring babies (βρέφη) to Jesus for blessing. When the disciples try to chase them away, Jesus calls the children to him and says: *Let the little children (παῖδιά) come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child (ὡς παῖδίον) will never enter it* (Luke 18:16-17). The Greek word βρέφη can mean an *unborn infant* or *embryo* and is here used interchangeably with παῖδίον. This shows that when Jesus commends the faith and example of children, he is not thinking of a certain age of child that has reached an age of accountability, but he is thinking of children all the way back to infancy. Mark 10 records the same incident using the term παῖδιά.

It is amazing to observe the number of professing Christians who are able to read these biblical accounts, and yet so directly contradict what Jesus clearly says about the faith of little children and infants. Not only do they deny this biblical evidence, but also those passages that attribute to children the immediate results and attributes of faith. *From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise* (Psalm 8:2). *You made me trust in you even at my mother's breast* (Psalm 22:9). *From birth I have relied on you* (Psalm 71:6). *He will bless those who fear the Lord -- small and great alike. May the Lord make you increase, both you and your children* (Psalm 115:13-14). *I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name . . . because you have known the Father* (I John 2:12, 13). Such things cannot be in the hearts of little children without faith. We might also note that Christ recognizes no differences of age when he asserts that unbelief means condemnation (Mark 16:16; John

3:18), and that new birth means participation in the kingdom of God (John 3:18).

It is true that we may not be able to observe faith in a tiny child or infant, nor will we be able to determine any psychological process used in bringing the child to faith. It is a miracle beyond our comprehension. Moreover, who can observe faith in a sleeping Christian adult? Who can know that faith exists in any other human being besides himself?

No one would deny that an infant has bodily life on the ground that it does not do a man's work; why should we argue that it cannot have spiritual life because it cannot demonstrate faith like a grown person? Why should it be considered impossible for God to create spiritual life in infants whom He endowed with bodily life? Or why is faith more impossible in children than in adults? (Schaller, p. 142)

Since the bible includes infants under the curse of original sin; and since it includes them in the population loved and justified by God through his Son; and since faith is necessary to apprehend justification and its blessings; and since tiny infants are described as being able to believe; and since the means of grace are used by God to bring sinners to faith, we are therefore bound to apply God's means of grace to little children as well as mature adults, according to his guidelines. Although little children may not be able to mentally comprehend all the complexities of the spoken word of God, we still include them under the blessing of his word when it is proclaimed. We don't expect that word to work magically, but we do expect the Holy Spirit to work miracles that exceed our ability to understand.

This also decides the question whether infants should be baptized. There is no reason to deny baptism to an infant that is presented for the sacrament, unless that child is presented for reasons that are foreign to the purpose of the sacrament. Baptism never works magically, or by the mere performance of the act, but always through the power of the word of God that is present. It is senseless to raise the question whether saving faith is produced by the gospel as spoken in connection with baptism, or as spoken before baptism. How the gospel produces faith is always a mystery, for even a believing adult cannot say how the miracle took place in him. Even if faith precedes baptism, as in most adult baptisms, the sacrament is still the divine seal of regeneration (Schaller, p. 160). Luther writes in his *Large Catechism*:

We bring the child in the conviction and hope that it believes, and we pray that God may grant it faith; but we do not baptize it upon that, but solely upon the command of God. Why so? Because we know that God does not lie. I and my neighbor and, in short, all men, may err and deceive, but the Word of God cannot err. (The Large Catechism, Triglotta, p. 747)

Is God able to produce faith in other ways outside of the means of grace? The unborn infant, John the Baptist, *leaped for joy* in his mother's womb at the sound of Mary's greeting to Elizabeth (Luke 1:44). The infant girls of the Old Testament, as well as the infant boys who were younger than eight days, did not have the benefit of the rite of circumcision to admit them to the covenant. God certainly did not exclude them from his covenant love. God is able to work faith outside of the means of grace, but we should not be so presumptuous to demand that he work around those means which he has entrusted to us. If ever God would take a child from

this world before baptism is possible, we place the eternal welfare of that child in his gracious hands. God is a God of love and grace, and we assume he has his own gracious way of handling the cases beyond our care. The purposeful rejection of baptism, on the other hand, is an outgrowth of unbelief, as shown by the example of the Pharisees and scribes in Luke 7:30.

Once a child is baptized we continue to expose that child's regenerated soul to the word of God so that its faith may grow and produce fruit. Jesus told us not only to baptize, but also to teach. Guiding a child in its faith journey is the most important responsibility God has given parents (Eph. 6:4). The parents essentially become models of God's love as they feed, nourish and encourage the child by word and example. The same applies to teachers and pastors, or anyone who is given a part in the Christian education of the child. To speak the word of God to a child, or to anyone, and not to model the love and forgiveness of Christ through our actions and behavior, can be detrimental to the growth of faith, if not destructive to faith.

It is possible for a child to be baptized as an infant and to later fall away into unbelief for the various reasons mentioned earlier. The fault does not lie with God's means of grace, but with the unbelieving heart. A baptized child may lose his faith and yet be brought back to faith later on. He would not then be rebaptized, because God never left the original covenant he made with that child in baptism (Is. 54:10). Instead, it was the baptized person who left God's covenant.

Our inability to understand and accept the miracle of infant faith has tempted some to think they can improve upon God's method of reaching out to little children. Some substitute a *dedication* of the child in the place of baptism and wait until it reaches an *age of accountability* when it can choose baptism on its own. This practice makes baptism something we do for God more than something God does for us. Whenever man presumes to *improve* upon God's means of grace, the free grace of God somehow gets pushed off into the background and man comes out as the shining hero who is able to *choose God*. History bears witness to this truth.

We include some thoughts about the application of the Lord's Supper to little children. The Lord gave us this sacrament for the ongoing strengthening of our faith. Jesus told his disciples that his body and blood in the bread and wine of the sacrament were give and poured out for them and *for many for the forgiveness of sins* (Matt. 26:26-27). Luther in his *Small Catechism* correctly affirms that *the words "For you" require only believing hearts*. The one factor that makes a sinner worthy of receiving the Lord's Supper is faith in the forgiveness that the Lord promises with his body and blood in the sacrament.

Our Lord tells us to receive this sacrament *in remembrance* (εἰς . . . ἀνάμνησιν) of him. Lest we get careless and bring judgment on ourselves by not *recognizing* (διακρίνειν) the body of the Lord in the sacrament, he tells us that we ought to *examine* (δοκιμάζειν) ourselves (I Corinthians 11:23-32). *Remembering, recognizing and examining* are all functions of a more mature mind and faith. Therefore, we instruct children in the basic teachings of the bible before they partake of this means of grace for the further strengthening of their faith. Our traditional practice of confirmation instruction has become an orderly way of preparing a child to receive a meaningful and blessed communion, usually by the time he or she reaches the age of 14 or 15.

Special Application: The Mentally Retarded

If God is able to instill faith in tiny infants, he can do the same for those who are mentally impaired or mentally disabled. About 15 per cent of our nation's population suffer from some type of mental problem, and about one-third of Americans suffer some form of mental illness in their lifetime. Mental problems strike both Christians and non-Christians alike. They are some of the many afflictions that have befallen mankind after the disastrous fall into sin. Jesus spent a great deal of time on this earth with people who were hurting from various sicknesses and disabilities, including mental impairments. Such people were often cast aside by the rest of society, but our Savior included all classes of the afflicted among those who are to benefit from his sacrifice.

Consider those who must live with *mental retardation*. About 2 1/2 to 3 per cent of the population of our country is afflicted with some degree of this impairment, which is in a category separate from mental illness. A person has typically been considered to be mentally retarded if his IQ score was 70-75, or below, before the age of 18, and has significant disabilities in two or more adaptive skills (communications, self-care, home living, social skills, etc.). Professionals have traditionally defined levels of retardation to assist them in planning programs for individuals.

<u>Level of MR</u>	<u>% of MR Population</u>	<u>IQ</u>	<u>Mental Age</u>
Mild	89%	69-55	8-12 yrs
Moderate	6%	54-40	5-8 yrs
Severe	3.5%	39-25	3-5 yrs
Profound	1.5%	24-0	0-3 yrs

Educators have usually referred to mildly retarded persons as *educable* and to moderately retarded persons as *trainable*. These traditional categories are more recently being replaced by a definition that focuses less on the disability and more on the needs of the individual. Most of those who have mental retardation are in the traditional *mild* category, and most of these live with their families, or on their own in relatively independent situations. (Schurter, pp. 9-10)

While the history of the church's ministry to the mentally retarded and the mentally ill has not always been commendable, the treatment given them by God's people has historically been far superior to that in the pagan world. The ancient Greeks and Romans considered madmen as *monsters* and a threat to society. They would employ the mentally deranged as *fools* for entertainment in their households. The Laws of Lycurgus allowed the deliberate neglect of deformed babies through abandonment to starvation or to wild beasts on the hillsides.

Historians generally acknowledge an increase of compassion toward such disadvantaged groups with the spread of the gospel. Families and Christian communities cared for their own disabled in the earlier years of Christianity. As time went on there appeared an occasional individual or charitable group who provided a special home for the mentally handicapped. Misunderstanding of mental illness and retardation compelled some Christian groups to attempt cures through physical punishment such as daily whippings. A predominant idea that grew out

of the Middle Ages was that a mentally handicapped child was really a devil's child. Even Luther may have been influenced by some of these ideas based on some informal remarks recorded as *Table Talk* (Taylor, p.23). However, Luther's official writings never cast a dark shadow on mentally handicapped people. The Puritans in early America labeled many a mentally handicapped person as a witch, and even executed them publicly. A popular 18th and 19th century belief was that the mentally disabled were really animals without souls. The close of the 19th century witnessed the *eugenic scare*, the widespread idea that the mentally disabled had to be locked away from society lest their strains infect the rest of humanity. Only in the last twenty to thirty years has there been a movement to care for the mentally handicapped in the home and in community home-like settings. After being *hidden* for generations, the mentally handicapped have again been appearing in our churches. Many a church has scrambled to find ways to minister to this unique population.

We need to recognize the myths about mental retardation that have prevailed in our society. Our own fears of the mentally retarded are really fears of the unknown. We may prefer to see them as *objects of dread*, instead of people, and want to see them separated from the rest of society. Some say that the retarded are *eternal children*, and insist on treating them like children with no chance to grow to maturity. Perhaps we have heard the retarded labeled as *holy innocents*, with heaven guaranteed by natural circumstances, rather than by faith in Christ. Another popular idea is that mental retardation is caused by *personal sin*. We remember what Jesus had to say on that subject in John 9 and Luke 13. People may rationalize that mental retardation is a *special blessing* sent to test one's faith or to teach one to love, etc. While this may happen, this idea is a subtle dehumanization of the mentally retarded person, signifying that he or she has no other value or significance before God. We might even look on the mentally retarded as *objects of pity and charity*, as if they could not survive without us. Such a view is a hit and run response that does not stop to accept and know that person as a real human being.

The church needs to minister to the retarded with the means of grace that they too may experience the joy of God's salvation through the gift of faith. Baptism should be administered with instruction given beforehand if the level of intellectual functioning permits it. It is important to recognize the various limitations of the learning capabilities of people with mental retardation. They may have a short attention span and learn slowly. They may have difficulty in reasoning and making judgments, hindering their capacity for making decisions. They generally are unable to think abstractly and cannot draw meanings out of stories or symbols, although they can certainly learn them and appreciate them. They may have difficulty applying the point of a lesson to their own lives. They frequently have a poor self image and suffer from low self esteem because of repeated failures in life. This is especially true of the mildly retarded. These factors make the message and experience of God's love all the more important for them (Schurter, p.10).

It is critical to keep in mind that each mentally retarded person is a distinct individual, with his or her own skills, abilities and limitations. Each one can benefit from a caring and sharing relationship with another person. Each one can offer unique gifts to other people who take the time to know that person. The challenge before the church is to find ways to communicate the good news of the gospel at their own level that the Holy Spirit may nourish a

childlike faith in their hearts. We need to *model God* for them that they may see and feel his love, as well as hear it. We must be careful not to overintellectualize religion, and completely eliminate emotionalism from the gospel. One middle-aged retarded man living in a group home told me that he always thought God loved only the educated people. It is quite possible that the church left him with that impression. We sometimes forget that faith is not primarily a matter of the mind, but of the soul and the heart.

Many a pastor has struggled with the question of how to prepare his mentally retarded member for receiving the Lord's Supper. The pastoral problems stem not so much from the inability of the student, as from the perceived inability of the teacher to serve that student. How can I tailor a confirmation course for one who is cognitively impaired? How much memorization should be required? How much time will it take? What is the minimum requirement for admission to the Lord's Supper? Solutions are not quick to be found to these complex questions, and sometimes pastors may find themselves in the scary position of *playing God* in deciding who should be admitted to the Lord's Supper.

There is no absolute answer. The instructor's task is to rightly divide the Word, making a clear distinction between the Law and the Gospel, leaving the final outcome to the Holy Spirit. Thus instructors of mentally retarded persons should always place great trust in God's promise that the Word doesn't return void but bears much fruit. Using all the expertise at our disposal, all the loving and educational methodologies, using repetition and prayer, we simply trust that the Spirit does work . . . sometimes in spite of our efforts, not because of them. Moreover, it should always be remembered that we are dealing with the person at his own level. That he functions at this level is all that a gracious God requires; for even "a bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not quench (Is. 42:3)." (Selle, p. 29)

Special Application: Alzheimer's Patients

Another mental affliction that is becoming more visible to our communities and churches is *dementia* in its various forms. Dementia is the irreversible deterioration of the intellectual faculties and accompanying emotional disturbances caused by organic brain disorders. The population of our nation that is 85 and over is growing faster than any other segment, due mainly to advanced health care. With the increased numbers of the aged comes the diseases and afflictions that accompany age. *Alzheimer's disease*, first identified in 1906, is the most common form of dementia. In our nation, one in ten persons over the age of 65 has Alzheimer's disease, and nearly half of those over 85 suffer from it. It is increasingly being found in people in their 40's and 50's. It is estimated that fourteen million Americans will have AD by the middle of the next century unless a cure or prevention is found. It is the fourth leading cause of death among adults.

The church is challenged to serve the means of grace to a growing population that is cognitively impaired. Again we must face our own fears about dementia and mental illness in general. Is dementia a punishment for some terrible sin? We refer again to Jesus' lesson on that subject in Luke 13:4. Christians should not plague themselves with questions about whether

they are being punished for their sins, but rather maintain a general attitude of repentance for all their sins and rest comfortable in the knowledge that they are forgiven by God for Jesus' sake. Is dementia caused by demons? While the bible speaks clearly and repeatedly of demoniac possession (Mark 9:17-29; Luke 8:26-36), and while the behavior of a demon-possessed person is similar to some types of mental illness, that does not justify our declaring the cause of every form of mental illness as demon possession. God may chasten his faithful by allowing misfortune and illnesses of various types to overtake them for the strengthening of their faith, but he never withdraws his love or his Spirit from those who are Christ's.

The pastor who ministers to the Alzheimer's patient may experience many frustrations. The patient may not respond to his private devotions, but only stares at the wall and rocks in the chair, completely ignoring him. The patient may react to his presence with anger and even shout accusations at him. Many are the horror stories of fine Christian men and women who because of dementia in their last years exhibit unchristian types of behavior and who shout obscenities at those whom they loved all their lives. As pastors we may say that we have more important things to do than talk to walls and endure obscenities yelled at us. One can come up with all sorts of excuses to justify the neglect of the church member who is suffering dementia. They don't increase church attendance! They are not major givers! They aren't going to call me and complain if I don't come to visit them! The ministry is just not worth the effort!

Then we turn to the bible and we find Jesus commending the ministry to the forgotten and the neglected. He lists the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and those in prison (Matt. 25). Surely he had in mind those demential elderly who today are shuffled off to a nursing home by an embarrassed, exhausted, and guilt-ridden family. He had in mind those families of the demented who suffer in silence and isolation. We often view the victims of dementia as mere shells of their former selves, unable to care for themselves and of no value to society, living in a make-believe world. Such perceptions can limit our ministry. We need to take the time to learn about the disease and how to work with those who suffer from it. We need to communicate and model the love of God in Christ to them at their own level (Ruffcorn, p.92).

Alzheimer's is a degenerative disease and progresses in stages. Various types of communication and ministry can be effective at each different stage. The *early stage* of Alzheimer's lasts from two to four years. Its symptoms are a loss of memory, confusion, and impaired judgment. *Reality therapy* can be used quite effectively to communicate at this stage. You make sure to identify yourself, identify the day, the place and the purpose of the visit, taking time to answer questions and gently correcting any disorientation. Using the more familiar bible readings, prayers, and hymns is always important when ministering to a dementia patient. Tape recordings of familiar hymns may elicit an attempt by the patient to sing along.

Stage two of Alzheimer's disease is characterized by further memory loss, behavioral problems, and swift mood swings. It may last from two to ten years. *Validation therapy* is helpful in communicating the word at this stage. It seeks to validate the experience of the individual by giving positive feedback, empathetic responses, and caring touches. The patient may be reliving some experience from the past in their life. Go along with them and minister to them in that time at that place. Communicate God's word at their level. Assure them that you

are a friend and that the Savior loves them.

Stage three of the disease may last from one to three years. Often the individual is confined to their bed or wheelchair and needs complete care. They may not respond to you and may often be sleeping. The most effective type of ministry at this stage is to be present with the patient, read the bible to them and pray with them, carry on a one-sided conversation assuring them of God's great love in Christ. You may want to sit quietly with a hand on the arm or shoulder to reassure them. You may never know if the patient is aware of your ministry, but we do know that the Spirit can work and nourish the wonder of faith through the gospel that is shared.

The Lord's Supper should not be withheld from the demential patient who has previously been instructed if it can be determined that they are still able to examine themselves and are able to recognize the body of Christ in the sacrament. This capacity may vary from day to day with some patients. We may be able to determine their awareness by watching their facial expressions as we talk about the sacrament, repeat Jesus' words of institution and show them the bread and wine. A blank stare may indicate unawareness of the sacrament, while an open mouth and closed eyes may show a reverent respect for that they are about to receive.

Should baptism ever be applied to a person suffering from dementia? Can we consider an unbaptized Alzheimer's victim in the third stage of the disease a mission prospect? If such a person has lived all their life in unbelief, does their dementia now seal them in that unbelief in a kind of *living death* so that they are now past all hope? Such questions are difficult to answer because the bible does not directly address them. It would seem that if a person is still alive, their time of grace has not yet passed. We always want to guard against indiscriminate use and flagrant abuse of the sacraments. If God gives us the opportunity to minister in difficult circumstances as in the case of a demential person, we pray that he also gives us the wisdom to address those circumstances in the most loving way possible, never underestimating the power of the Spirit to produce the miracle of faith through the means of grace.

Conclusion

Ministering to people in these unusual and unique situations can give a person a fresh and realistic perspective on the ministry. So often, we are tempted to do only those things that will accomplish the most in the shortest amount of time, and be noticed by the greatest number of people. Serving the means of grace to infants and little children, the mentally retarded, the mentally ill, the victims of dementia, and others in similar circumstances reminds us that ministry is a calling to be with people, no matter what their situation in life, and to share with them, one on one, the saving love of God in Christ. The Savior repeatedly showed his disciples in a gentle but firm manner that the faith of a little child was to be more sought after than all manner of maneuvering to make one self great in the kingdom. He trained them to be *heralds*, mere instruments to convey the saving gospel of Christ to all creatures, and to let the Holy Spirit create the miracle of faith in the hearts of the listeners. The church needs to direct people back to Calvary through bold and clear preaching and teaching of the law and the gospel. We must be

careful not to direct people to their own works, emotions and feelings, as if faith were some type of work that earned salvation. That only leads people to walk around contemplating their spiritual navels instead of reeling in God's big prizes through faith. Faith will come where the gospel is proclaimed. It's as simple as that. Let's not make a simple matter complicated.

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

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