

A Man's Journey from Orthodoxy, to Cult Church,

Back to Orthodoxy

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December 6, 2010

Christians know the amazing gift of God's grace. That a perfect God could love the unlovable; that he would freely give forgiveness to those seemingly beyond pardon is something that cannot be understood. It's what moves Christians to live out love and thanks for all of the things God has done for them. Now imagine that you neglect that clear message of grace, bury it, and finally allow it to be shackled. Instead of being God's free gift, it becomes a reward for perfect works and obedience. What joy when free grace is announced again after years of having a price required to make it valid? This is a story of a man who lived through that very process. Raised in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, John Bernhoft fell away as a young man. Later he began to seek for religion and wandered into the cult church of the World Wide Church of God. It was there, of all places, that grace found him and led him away from heretical teachings and religion bound to works. It was grace that brought him back to orthodoxy in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. He shares his story and thoughts concerning interactions with those in cult churches. His life really has come full circle.

I. Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LCMS)

It was late afternoon on August 17, 1961. The 36th convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was tense with the decision before them: whether or not to break fellowship ties with the



Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. These two “sister” synods were just short of marking 90 years of fellowship; and yet they were clearly becoming estranged. Since the 1930's and 1940's the WELS had begun to notice that LCMS was struggling with issues of fellowship, beginning with their involvement in the scouts as well as the military chaplain program. Despite WELS

attempts to correct their erring “sister” the LCMS was continuing to walk away from its formerly scriptural and doctrinally sound stance. Finally, in the late Thursday afternoon on that mid-August day the painful decision was made: 124 to 49 votes calling for the breaking of fellowship between these two church bodies.¹

To John Bernhoft this meant nothing. Though he was a member of the LCMS and regularly attended Capital Drive Lutheran he couldn't have cared less that these two “sister” synods were now split over doctrinal arguments. He was only three years old at the time of the split; and yet this break marked a very real problem in his synod. It would continue to fester and grow in the LCMS, as well as causing struggles in his home church during the next decade. Throughout his young adulthood these problems would cause him to question his place in the synod.

Capital Drive Lutheran was in turmoil during the late 60's and early 70's. The question that was a constant thorn in their side was, “what are the Scriptures? Are they fact or myth?” It was this question that was threatening to tear apart the congregation. A sizeable portion of this large congregation² was leaning towards the historical-critical³ view of Scripture. They wanted to move closer to the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America who both

¹ Pg 2 A tale of Two Synods

² During this time, Bernhoft says that Capital Drive Lutheran had over 1,000 members.

³ In his paper titled “The Historical-Critical Method of Bible Interpretation”, Professor Siegbert Becker wrote concerning this method of interpretation: “This view holds that the writers of the Bible because they were human beings who lived at a certain time in history reflect the views and opinions of their own historical period...(the Scriptures) are nevertheless the product of mortal, fallible men to a certain extent...” (pg 4). While he notes that moderate historical-critical scholars can, theoretically, find most of Scripture to be God-inspired, those of a more radical bent find errors constantly where Scriptures run up against reason. He questioned the validity and wisdom of such a method. In this paper he writes specifically targets those in the LCMS wishing to use this method: “Even if the moderates in the Missouri Synod do not want to be accused of ‘finding fault with the Bible,’ yet it is obvious that anyone who uses the historical-critical method claims the right to sit in judgment on the Scriptures. Even if they accept as true everything that is written in Scripture, but accept it only because they have demonstrated to their own satisfaction that it is true, the method would still be unworthy of the Christian who says with Samuel, ‘Speak, Lord, Thy servant heareth”” (pg 5). The use of the historical-critical method at Concordia Seminary and the erroneous instruction of many of its instructors played a major role in leading the governing board to censure many of those professors, thus leading to Seminex. The argument over the historical-critical method, as seen from Becker's paper, caused struggles for congregations throughout the LCMS.

held to this view of interpreting the Bible. An opposing group in the congregation held firmly that the Bible was to be viewed literally. “Yes, Jonah spent a long weekend in the belly of a large fish. Yes, Jesus changed H²O into an amazing vintage of wine.” Bernhoft clearly remembers these debates as a young teenager, and it troubled him. Capital Drive Lutheran eventually left the LCMS and joined the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Before that congregational shift, Bernhoft’s parents had taken their family to another LCMS church closer to their home. Berea Lutheran was a much smaller congregation—about 350 members at the time—but it was a place that the family was able to be actively involved. By that time, Bernhoft was 14 years old. Bernhoft describes his parents as people who were content to be “hands and feet.” They shied away from leadership positions but were always ready and willing to be active in the congregation when the opportunity arose. He notes that his parents lived morally and loved their Lord, but they did not bring religious discussion or devotions into the home. That was something generally left for Sunday.

Bernhoft says that when it came to involvement in the church, he took after his grandparents who were very active in the leadership of their own congregation.⁴ When he joined hand chimes, he soon found himself leading it. After he joined the youth group, he became an organizer and leader. This active membership within his church is something that will be a recurring role throughout his life. Though he found many areas to keep busy within his congregation, Bernhoft was aware of the ongoing struggle within the LCMS. While in high school he witnessed the outcome of investigation into the teachings of the faculty at Concordia Seminary in which the faculty was voted to be censured. He was well aware of the large scale walkout of professors and students and the formation of Seminex as a result of the censure. By

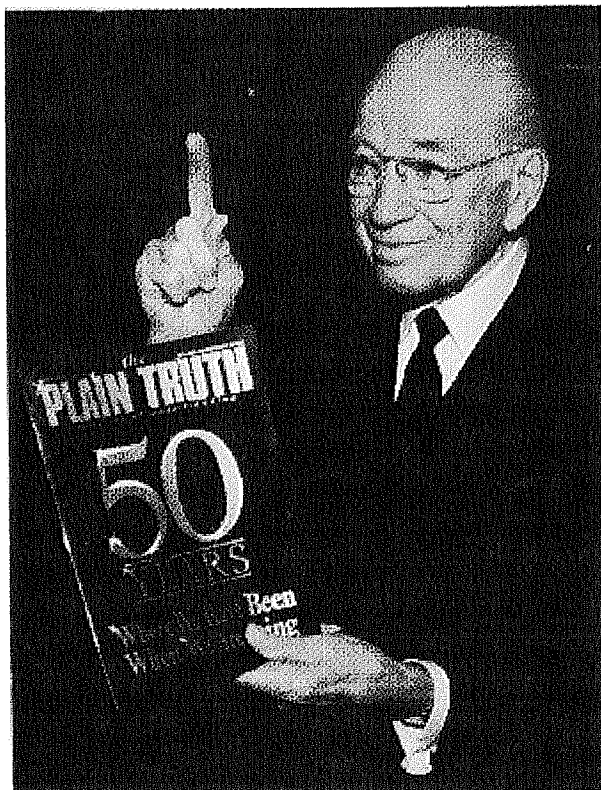
⁴ Bernhoft’s grandparents were active members of a WELS congregation. John also notes that while his parents were “quiet” Christians, his grandparents were very vocal about their faith and brought Christ into their home life.

the time he graduated high school, Bernhoft saw a large segment of LCMS break away to form the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.⁵ These events would play a determining factor years later when he began to look for a new church home.

Despite his involvement in his congregation, Bernhoft's parents did not send him to the local LCMS high school. He sees this as a failing of the LCMS. Despite its close proximity of his childhood home, and despite his parents willingness to send him and his siblings to the private school— despite the additional cost—Milwaukee Lutheran High School did not actively promote attendance to the local LCMS members. Instead Bernhoft enrolled and attended the local school. After completing high school, Bernhoft left to attend college at Milwaukee and then Madison. While he had always seen his family as strong Christians he says that his faith, as well as the faith of his siblings who also attended public colleges, faced heavy challenges at this time. He said, “That environment tore at the faith fabric. For the first time in your life you are confronted with people who not only disagree with you, but belittle your faith...a couple of years in that experience and all of the kids in our family went astray...seriously astray.” By the time he had finished college, he was done with the LCMS. In fact he was done with “church” altogether. After a few years helping out his brother with his rock band while also spending 10 years working hard to start his business, Bernhoft was very far away from where he had began. He was “really, seriously falling astray.” It was during the last couple of years of this journey that he met his wife Gail. After getting married and having kids, they decided that they needed a change.

⁵ According to <http://www.elca.org/Who%20We%20Are/History/Lutheran%20Roots%20in%20America.aspx> about 300 congregations and 110,000 members broke away from the LCMS to form the AELC.

II. The Worldwide Church of God (WCG)



⁶ A Laundromat may not seem a likely place for a major life decision, but when Bernhoft and his wife stumbled across a *Plain Truth* periodical while waiting for their laundry, they were intrigued. *The Plain Truth* was one of the major ways that the Worldwide Church of God reached out and spread their message. The Bernhofts liked what they saw and, as John describes their state of mind at the time, it really fed into their “conspiratorial nature”. It seemed to have all of the answers that the rest of the

world didn’t have. It was now the mid 1980’s and Bernhoft, at 27 years old, had been away from church and orthodox teaching for almost a decade. With his past membership of a troubled church in Lutheran Synod that had gone through sweeping changes, Bernhoft had no desire to be part of a denominational church. His wife’s previous religious experience was quiet different from his own. She had grown up with a mother who had a universalist view, picking and choosing her favorite parts of many different religions. Gail, Bernhoft’s wife, had been baptized into the Mormon Church along with her brothers and sisters, but all had left it. Growing up they had experienced multiple religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and all different “flavors of Christianity.”

⁶ A picture of Herbert Armstrong, founder of the WCG, holding a “Plain Truth” publication.

When the Bernhoft's came across the WCG material, they were amazed. Bernhoft describes it this way: "It's hard to argue with it. It makes you think that they have something very special. I just stumbled on this secret club and God's only calling certain people."

What the WCG taught *was* something different; dangerously so. Though they claimed to be the only true Christian church, their teachings were actually heretical and placed the emphasis on an individual's struggle to be worthy of God's grace. This paper is not intended to categorize the full list of false teachings of the WCG, but a number of them need to be addressed to show the danger that this cult was for its members.⁷ For this purpose the topics of prophecy, the Trinity and salvation, healing, and Anglo-Israelism will be discussed.⁸

Prophecy played a very significant role in WCG. In many ways it was the central role since Herbert Armstrong, the founder of the church, taught that the gospel had been hidden since 53 A.D. It wasn't until God had opened the Bible to him in 1927 that he "discovered" it again. Armstrong often referred to himself as "Elijah" and felt that he alone had been called to reveal it this message to the world. Such arrogance comes across in many of his prophecies and he claimed divine inspiration: "Actually, I feel with deep conviction that I myself really did not author this book - that the living Jesus Christ is its real author. I was merely like a stenographer writing it down. And with that understanding I feel I may say that this is the most important—the most tremendously revealing—book, since the Bible!"⁹

⁷ The WCG was a very sizeable group. According to the Worldwide Church of God's (now known as Grace Communion International) website (see Bibliography for address), at their height in 1990 the church enjoyed 133,000 people in weekly attendance.

⁸ For further information of the false teachings that these "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15) taught, two good resources are *Kingdom of the Cults* (the newer editions show both their old teachings as well as how they have changed) as well as the Joseph Tkach's book *Transformed by Truth*. Tkach is the current Pastor General of the now-Christian church.

⁹ This quote is from January, 1979 edition of the "Plain Truth" in which Armstrong promoted his current book *The Incredible Human Potential*.

At other times, Armstrong admitted to his closest followers that “new truths” came to him through more earthly means. In his book, *Transformed by Truth*, the current Pastor General of the renamed WCG—now known as Grace Communion International since April 3, 2009—Joseph Tkach¹⁰ recalls a story that John Kiesz told him. At the time, Kiesz and Armstrong had been sharing an office and he found Armstrong typing. After asking what he was doing, Armstrong replied that he was typing up a “new truth” that had just been revealed to him. Kiesz, a former Seventh Day minister who had joined the WCG, looked at this new prophecy. He recognized it from the Church of God (Seventh Day) periodical *The Biblical Advocate* and informed Armstrong that it had appeared in it several months earlier. “Yes, that’s how God revealed it to me” Armstrong answered (pg 89-90). Tkach goes on to express the burden that the members felt from the many “new truths” handed down from Armstrong:

Our spiritual lives were heavy with rules and threats. Most of us began to measure ourselves more by what we didn’t do than by what we did. As our rule books grew thick, our concept of grace grew correspondingly thin. We did not so much have a vital relationship with Christ as we had a cognitive acceptance of certain esoteric doctrines (pg 91).

With the revelations and “new truths” given by Armstrong, WCG members felt certain they were the only true church. They viewed all others as apostate and false teachers.

One of the reasons Armstrong held all other Christian churches as “false teachers” was because of belief of the Trinity. Armstrong declared that it was a pagan concept. His teachings varied greatly: The Father had a body just as man does. The Holy Spirit was not considered a “He” but instead was a force or power; an “it”. As for Jesus, Armstrong didn’t deny his divinity. He taught that Jesus had to be a separate God from the Father. Jesus was also eternal, but he

¹⁰ Joseph Tkach is the second Pastor General since Herbert Armstrong: after Armstrong’s death in 1996, his hand-picked successor Joseph Tkach Sr. became the Pastor General of the WCG. He began to slowly make changes in the doctrines of the WCG until his death in 1995. Since then, his son, Joseph Tkach Jr. has been the Pastor General.

hadn't become the Son of God until he was born of Mary. Tkach writes about the WCG teachings concerning Jesus the purpose and man's salvation:

We taught that the primary mission of Jesus was to prove that the law could be kept...we taught that the destiny of all true believers (that is, members in Good standing in the WCG) was to become God even as God is God. We said that we would become part of a "God family." The quest of every believer was to become God even as He is God. This is one reason we so vigorously attacked the doctrine of the Trinity. In our minds, the Trinity limited God to three Persons—hardly an acceptable teaching when you insisted that every believer's destiny was to become a literal God in the God family. (pg 93)

Since believers desired a very high thing, much was expected of them. The list of requirements for members of the WCG, as stated earlier, was a heavy burden. Among those things that "must be done" was the fulfillment of Old Testament requirements and rituals. Therefore, Saturday Sabbath worship must be adhered to, the dietary laws prescribed to the Jewish people, and the observance of religious festivals were required. These things, as well as numerous others, were necessary for salvation so that man could become a "God in the God family."

Another teaching that Armstrong insisted on was that members stay away from modern medicine. He felt that any who sought healing in any way other than direct divine healing was guilty of idolatry. He taught that medicine came from pagan background so true believers should trust God to heal directly. While he insisted on this teaching, near the end of his life, he began to relax it for himself. As he neared his 90's his health started to fail. He took medicine and always traveled with a nurse despite his condemnation of modern medicine. While his used medical profession he continued to uphold the WCG's teaching refusing its members from going to doctors or taking medicine. While some people noticed his hypocritical stance, Tkach admits that a many of his closest followers it didn't even register that he wasn't practice and teaching were not consistent.

The final teaching of the WCG that will be discussed to a great degree in this paper is considered the central teaching. Armstrong did not come up with the idea of Anglo-Israelism¹¹, but he did put his own unique spin on this unorthodox teaching. He taught that British people are the direct descendants of the ten “lost” tribes of Israel. Specifically he saw the people of England and the United States as the descendants of Manasseh and Ephraim. Despite a total lack of biblical or historical evidence for this theory, Armstrong made this a central teaching. He built up this “new truth” to his followers through “tortured etymology,” as Tkach describes it.

For example, he said that the Hebrew word for “covenant” (*berith*) became significant in English when combined with the Hebrew word for “man” (*ish*). Since vowels are not written in the Masoretic text of the original Hebrew text, the *e* in *berith* drops out to form the term *brith*. Since ancient Hebrews did not pronounce the *h*, *berith* became *brit*. Put that together with *ish* and you have “British” (pg 100).

There are more examples, but this one is enough to show the lack of linguistic support to his claims. He claimed to have other evidence as well. For instance, he said that the Stone of Scone that the Stone of Scone¹² was actually the rock that Jacob had used for a pillow during his vision of the angels ascending and descending from heaven.¹³

This may seem a strange teaching to make central to the WCG, but Armstrong saw this as a highly important “truth”. His heavy emphasis of Sabbath day worship was a sign that the United States was from the “lost tribes” of Israel. The fact that most other churches worshipped on Sunday proved that they had turned away from their heritage as Israelites. Armstrong also insisted that Anglo-Israelism was the key to biblical prophecy. By seeing themselves as modern day Israelites, Armstrong identified the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation with the

¹¹ Anglo-Israelism (or British-Israelism) comes in many different forms, but they all revolve around the basic principle: Western Europeans are the direct descendants of the lost “ten tribes” of Israel.

¹² The Stone of Scone, was a stone originally used in rituals of crowning Scottish kings, was later moved and placed under the Coronation Throne of English monarchs. In 1996 it was returned to Scotland.

¹³ For more information see either *Kingdom of the Cults* (pg 512-519) and *Transformed by Truth* (pages 100-101)

United States at the center of events. In his system of Anglo-Israelism, even the gospel message was to revolve around these remnants of the “lost tribes”.

Bernhoft found himself enamored in this church which declared such outrageous teaching. It was so “different” from the rest of the churches. The WCG’s teachings seemed, on the surface, to be sound to those without theological training and who were eager to hear something different. Another thing that Bernhoft found particularly welcoming was the heavy law. As he describes it “took a lot of law and made it easy to clean up your act because it is a performance based institution.” For those who wanted to change their lives, the many rules and regulations of the WCG made a very set pattern to follow. It took away Christian freedom which can be easily abused by weak Christians. Instead they were given a narrow path.

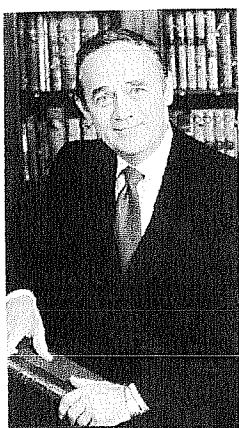
The WCG did this largely by highlighting many of the Old Testament regulations and rituals that are often minimized in Christian churches. John remembers how he enjoyed learning about these things and seeing how they pointed to Jesus. Then he was easily convinced that Christian holidays were sinful because of supposedly pagan backgrounds. For instance, the WCG was eager to equate Christmas with the pagan Winter Solstice celebrations.¹⁴ All of these things proved to Bernhoft that his family was in the right place.

Bernhoft also enjoyed the involvement that WCG demanded. There were no “fence sitters” as are often found in congregations. The hierarchy kept the members busy. Almost every night of the week was spent in activity with others in the local church. For Bernhoft who, as a young teen, organized and led in his church this was comfortable. He and his wife threw themselves into becoming active members and training their young family into the teachings of

¹⁴ The WCG also said that Easter was celebrated on the wrong day. They count three 24 hour periods from Friday and say that Jesus wouldn’t have risen on Easter Sunday, but on Easter Monday. This, of course, is a misunderstanding of Jewish calculations of time. Any part of a day would constitute a “day.” Thus the “countdown” is not one of 72 hours, but Friday evening (1 day), Saturday (day 2), and Sunday morning (day 3).

the WCG. Bernhoft remembers reading and devoting himself to studying all of the teachings of the church, and constantly being reaffirmed by what he found. He notes that the teaching about grace wasn't absent. It was, unfortunately, twisted. Instead of being God's freely given love for man, it was a reward for striving hard.

Yet, while so many things seemed right about the WCG, there were some oddities that bothered Bernhoft and his wife. The most troublesome to him the most was the system of tithing found in the WCG at that time. They followed the "Old Testament" system in which there were three main tithes. The first was a ten percent tithe of their gross income given to the church. Another tithe was ten percent collected every third year for widows and orphans, especially for those in poverty. He didn't have a problem with these. The third, however, caused him to struggle. This tithe stated that ten percent of their gross income was to be saved every year and then spent during the Feast of Tabernacles.¹⁵ He remembers thinking how wasteful it was to throw away all of this money just to fulfill the tithe. The other teaching that bothered him was the preparation for Passover. For his first year in the WCG, Bernhoft fulfilled all the requirements of ridding his house of yeast. For the rest of his time in the church he and his wife decided that they would not comply with those teachings. It wasn't until later that he realized



that they were not alone in bending some rules. Despite these infractions, Bernhoft was still fully engaged in the church.

¹⁶ Bernhoft joined the WCG at a very climatic time. It was near the end of the life of Armstrong and within his first two years he witnessed the death of the founder and first Pastor General of the WCG. After this Joseph Tkach

¹⁵ Bernhoft noted one incidence when all the local WCG churches "camped out" at the Dells for a week trying to spend their saved ten percent in order to fulfill "God's will".

¹⁶ Joseph Tkach Sr., Herbert Armstrong's hand-picked successor for the WCG.

Sr. take the helm. Within a year afterwards things began to slowly change. Tkach Sr. told members that it was no longer wrong to seek help from the medical profession or to take medicine. He also said that it was fine to celebrate birthdays and even for women to use makeup. While these may seem like minor changes, some within the church saw a softening from Armstrong's teachings. At this point some splinter groups broke away to form their own churches. While things were slowly beginning to change, Bernhoft remembers the day when he realized just how very wrong things were in the WCG. Some men from his local congregation came to his door with one purpose: to read Paul's letter to the Galatians with him. He remembers that after reading through it twice and his eyes were opened. Immediately he knew that he was part of a cult. He wasn't working for salvation; he was saved by grace alone. This marked the major turning point in his life. Instead of running away, Bernhoft became very active with a "liberal group" within the WCG. He remembers how they used materials from Dale Ratzlaff¹⁷ as well as information from other cult-deprogrammers, teaching that the members they were saved by grace. He recalls how fortunate he is that this change didn't seem to affect his young daughters, Sarah and Rebecca. He remembers some families dealing with deeply depressed teenagers who learned that their basic religious beliefs had been lies.

Finally Bernhoft came to a point around 1990 when he decided that he didn't want to be a part of the WCG anymore.¹⁸ Bernhoft, then in his early thirties, took his family and began looking for a new church home. They spent a few years without a church, instead preferring to

¹⁷ Dale Ratzlaff is a former Seventh-Day Adventist who has dedicated himself to creating materials to break people free from that cult. Because most cults are very law based, his materials are able to be used for most cults. Bernhoft remembers how influential these materials were for many in the WCG who were turning away from false teachings as well.

¹⁸ It should be noted that the WCG (now Grace Communion International) is no longer a cult. They have changed their former heretical teachings, and teach salvation through faith in Christ alone. Such a change has not been without pain. The congregation which once boasted a weekly attendance of 133,000 now has a membership of about 47,000 (according to the GCI website: www.gci.org). While they are in doctrinal error in some areas (i.e. fellowship and Lord's Supper) they are a Christian church.

check out many non-denominational churches. His daughters, who had been home-schooled during their time in the WCG with Baptist school materials, were then enrolled in Covered Bridge Christian School in Cedarburg¹⁹. When the school failed, the Bernhofts decided to look for a church with a school for their daughters.

III. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)

After doing some looking, the Bernhofts narrowed down the school prospects to six. One of them, and the most tempting, was Morning Star Lutheran. It belonged to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Despite the excellent education and opportunities for his daughters, Bernhoft wasn't sure he wanted to be back in that kind of setting; he wanted to avoid the denominational churches. He still remembered his bad experiences from his youth in the LCMS and the struggles he saw. He also had just come out of the WCG which had spoken heavily against the denominational world, referring to such church bodies as the "Whore of Babylon."



Despite his reticence, he met with the principle and staff minister at Morning Star. He decided to enroll his daughters in 2000. When it was suggested that he and his wife enroll in Bible information classes, Bernhoft was firm. He trusted the church and school to instruct his girls, but he did not want to become a member. He was more than willing to pay the higher cost as a non-member as long as his children received a good education. At this time his older daughter, Sarah, was in sixth grade, and Rebecca was in fourth. The Bernhofts continued to visit other churches, but never became a member of any of them.

¹⁹ Covered Bridge Christian School had Baptist affiliations.

After three years of interacting with Morning Star and seeing his daughters being trained within the WELS, the Bernhofs became members in 2003. Just as he was an active youth in his home congregation in the LCMS, and as an adult in the WCG, Bernhoft found himself eager to get involved at Morning Star. After being a member for two years he was asked by Pastor Charles Raasch, the pastor at Morning Star, if he would consider serving on the evangelism board. When Bernhoft first heard this, he didn't feel it was a good fit. He doesn't see himself as a good conversation starter, and thought that his introvert personality wouldn't fit well with evangelism. Despite his resistance, he agreed and threw himself into the work of the committee. After serving a little more than two years, he was selected to chair the committee; a position he has held for over three years now.²⁰ He enjoys his work as the chair and is excited about the continued work he is involved in. Instead of the burden of works to which he was formerly tied to, Bernhoft has the joy of proclaiming God's free and full grace.

IV. Bernhoft's thoughts on the WELS and cult outreach

Having spent years into a cult church, Bernhoft is in a unique position to give advice and share his insight on what is effective to reaching those in a similar circumstance. The first piece of advice, while seemingly obvious, has a deep impact: Don't use the word "cult." This is not to deny the heretical teachings and dangerous doctrine being proclaimed by cult churches. Instead it is a reminder to approach these people gently. These people see themselves as Christians; and many are, though deeply troubled and dangerously erring. Bernhoft suggests a tactful way to get into a conversation with such individuals: "We recognize you as a Christian brother and see that

²⁰ As a former member of the evangelism committee I can personally note Bernhoft's zeal for sharing the gospel with the community. He eagerly sought new ways to get out and proclaim Christ. Despite his self-noted introvert personality, in my experience this has never created an obstacle for his work as the chair or in his personal interactions with the community through planned events.

you have made significant changes in your life; we will respectfully disagree on some issues, but if you are open to discuss them, we would love to talk to you.” Such a suggestion may not always be valid if the individual clearly denies Christ saving work, but the advice behind it is sound: don’t angrily denounce the individual as a damned soul, but come to them with respect and understanding.

Cult churches, by their nature, pick and choose specific verses out of books to build up their false teachings. Because of this, most members never read anything in the Bible except what their church highlights. Bernhoft remembers from his time in the WCG how he never heard anyone teach about Galatians and rarely from Ephesians. He also never remembers reading from these books until he was encouraged to do so by fellow members recognizing the errors in the WCG. It was then that he finally saw God’s free grace through Paul’s words. He suggests asking members of cult churches to read all of Galatians. Then have them read it again.

Another suggestion Bernhoft has is a bit more startling. He states that the WELS has to be very careful how it comes across to former or current cult members. His reason is shocking: he says that he and other former WCG members notice that the WELS has some aspects of a cult church. It has nothing to do with doctrine or teaching, but rather presentation. Bernhoft says that because of the WELS culture, it can often be a closed community which may be mistaken for elitism. Bernhoft says that many people feel as if the WELS is unapproachable. These are familiar marks of cult churches. He strongly emphasizes this doesn’t mean the WELS should compromise or change its position. Instead it should control how the message is presented. One example he cited was the practice of close communion. He knows that it is a biblical practice and must be maintained; however he feels that the way it is announced in worship and taught to non-members often sends a message contrary to its purpose. Rather than being seen as a loving action

for both members and non-members, it comes across as cold and dividing. He notes that many congregations do a fine job of explaining the scriptural reason and showing concern; others struggle with this. His comments warrant thoughtful consideration by pastors as they strive to share the Word of God with those from a cult-church background.

Bernhoft knows the grace of God very well. As a child and youth, he knew the amazing love of God: that he had sent his Son to redeem sinners. Despite knowing that Jesus had saved him, Bernhoft began to wander away from the truth and neglected his faith. After separating himself from the means of grace, he wandered until he was pulled into the dangers of the cult-church. But God was not done with him. By the grace of God, Bernhoft was brought to the truth. From orthodoxy, to cult, and brought back to God's pure message of salvation. He has seen his life brought full circle by his loving and patient God.

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