

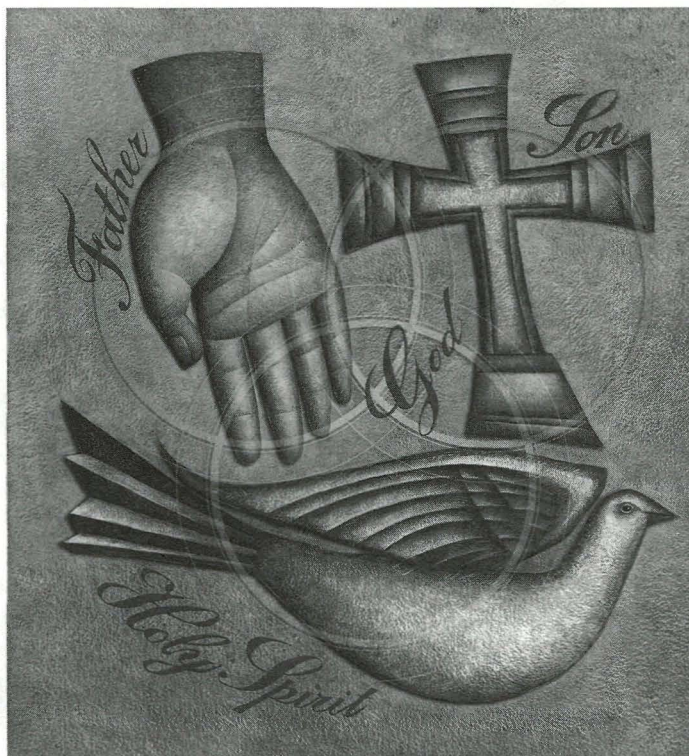
LifeLight™
FOUNDATIONS

Triune God



LEADERS GUIDE

For nearly two millennia, Christians have tried to express visually the profound mystery of the Holy Trinity—one God in three, distinct persons—that is revealed in God’s Holy Word. Baptized into the one name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19) and confessing their faith in the ancient creeds, believers of all times and places have sought to bring forth their love and praise for their triune God. Depicted here are three equal, interlocking rings (called Borromean rings in mathematics), which express “that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance” (Athanasian Creed). In traditional Christian art, the distinct yet coeternal, coequal persons of the triune God may be depicted by the hand (God the Father), the cross (God the Son), and the dove (God the Holy Spirit).



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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;
- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership team and discussion-leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 61.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (see p. 63);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;

- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;
- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion-leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible-study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in

their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another 5 minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). They will follow the same schedule, but they may use a recording to listen to the week's lecture presentation. The discussion leader will obtain the recording and leaflets from the director. A congregation may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process begins all over again!

Recommended Study and Worship Resources

Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986. Interpretive notes on each page form a running commentary on the text. The book includes cross-references, a 35,000-word concordance, full-color maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

Every Voice a Song: Pipe Organ Accompaniment for 180 Hymns and Liturgy. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-1565). Use this music CD for worship hymn accompaniment.

The Natural Knowledge of God

Romans 1:18–23; Acts 14:15–17; 17:26–28; Romans 2:14–16; 2 Corinthians 10:4–5; Psalm 19; 104; Hebrews 11:3

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

There are two sources for the knowledge of God: natural and revealed. In this study we will learn about the first of these, the natural knowledge of God.

Objectives

That participants, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, will be led to

1. learn what the natural knowledge of God is;
2. understand its purpose as a witness to all people of God's existence; and
3. appreciate its relation to faith and the Word of God.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 63.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Hymn accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. Some of the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7. Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Almighty God, our most gracious heavenly Father, as we begin this most blessed of studies considering You, the true and living God of heaven and earth and the Savior of mankind, grant us grace to hear and believe the truth, to Your glory and our good, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

Welcome to a course on *God Himself*. We will study what God reveals in His Word for us to believe about Him. This includes His nature and attributes (properties or characteristics), His works, and His tripersonal essence. We also will see how all these bear upon man's relation to God as Creator and Redeemer.

Some might dismiss this study as futile. God, they would say, cannot be known. Even if He could be known, they might add, such knowledge amounts to no "practical" value in life. So the doctrine of God is rarely touched upon in some Bible classes and sermons. Jesus is then easily reduced to being a spiritual guru, a life-skills coach, or an enlightened ethicist who can help people live the "good life."

Yet God's Word brims with testimony that God's disclosure of Himself is to save man and restore to him the true knowledge of God through faith. God's Word reveals definite, certain, and authoritative matters. Confusion and vagaries remain only because we refuse to receive the light of God's truth and cherish it in faith as His good gift.

God means to bless us by giving us knowledge of Himself. Knowing God is not simply or even fundamentally acquiring theological information or compiling facts of divinity, as if the Bible were a religious almanac of sorts. God reveals Himself in intelligible, verbal communication which we can and should confess and teach in clear, fixed, and meaningful doctrinal statements. Yet, the knowledge of God imparts more than data. It brings us God Himself. It is that by which we have communion with Him.

Because the true knowledge of God is *revealed*, possession of it depends not upon human powers of the will or mind in any way or to any degree. It is a gracious gift from the Father who delights to give us the Kingdom. God's truth is to be received in the meekness of faith. Faith receives all that God graciously makes known of Himself, by no effort, work, or merit of its own.

Therefore this study calls for *hearing ears*. The mystery of our triune God has been made known in Jesus Christ. Hearts that are ambitious, proud, or argumentative will not receive it. Rather, hearts believing the truth will gain the knowledge of the great God who is (otherwise) unknowable, and they will be eternally blessed.

1 The False Knowledge of God (Romans 1:18–23)

So how do we know God? How can we study, learn, and understand Him? What is the source and basis for our knowledge of Him? Where can we go to get it? Is the knowledge of God recognized and verified by reason or science?

Scripture says that the knowledge of God humans have in and of themselves—what we can know of God by our own natural powers—can only yield falsehoods in this sinful world. The problem is not mental defect but moral defect. The human mind, will, affections, and self-consciousness are all corrupted by sin. What comes from the flesh is flesh. It may not appear this way to sinners, but that is the deceit of sin.

Consider Romans 1:18–23:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the

glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Several important points are made in this section.

a. God has provided for all humans a witness of His existence in creation. It is clearly set forth "in the things that have been made." People need not look outside or beyond their own existence, for the witness of God is in that which we see, smell, hear, taste, feel, and think.

b. Notice specifically what may be known of God naturally (meaning both from nature and by nature): namely, His "eternal power and divine nature." Naturally, people can know that God is not man, that He stands above, beyond, and apart from all creation. So whatever and whoever God is cannot be discovered or known on the basis of human experience. Humans can only conceive of and understand what lies within the limits of our temporal and finite state of being. The corruptions of sin limit us still more, which leads to the next point.

c. This truth about God's existence is suppressed in men's hearts. It might be asked: if this witness is so universal and without exception, why do more people not acknowledge it? What makes it so disputed? Verse 18 says that when this truth enters their hearts and minds, they restrain it. The witness exists objectively but is subjectively warped. This is what our sinful nature causes us to do with the truth. Rather than receiving and welcoming it, sin leads us to oppose, hinder, and try to silence it in every way. Unrighteous people cannot and will not consent to the truth. To do so would admit that God is righteous and humans are not. This we cannot do, since we are by nature unjust.

d. Instead, humans in their unrighteousness imagine God according to their own existence. To admit that God's nature and state of being are in fact not our own is to accept that we lack the image of God. It concedes that our nature and life are sinful, that we are not right(eous). But sin will not permit this. Instead, in sin we seek to justify ourselves by pretending that the truth of God made known in creation—what we may naturally know of God—shows God to be of a form like our own. God's nature and state of being are thereby made out to be mortal, and people end up worshiping creatures, not the Creator (Romans 1:25).

Interestingly, the natural knowledge of God ends up showing that fallen human beings stand in need of revelation.

Before the fall, Adam lived in communion with God, hearing His Word and receiving His gifts and graces. In this way, Adam had the knowledge of God. He did not have this knowledge by his own investigation, judgment, deduction, or observation. It came from God as a gift. This gift gave Adam understanding and wisdom. In light of these, he had knowledge of other things; and in thinking about them, he employed his powers of reason and his human senses. All that Adam knew about God, though, he knew from God and on account of God. Sin deprived him of this knowledge.

Sin does not regard God as God. With sin, God's Word is no longer received and recognized as true or divine. In place of God's revelation, something of one's own choosing or from one's own mind is regarded as God. Man makes his own image of God. Thus, all true knowledge of God is lost, and in its place the lie (Romans 1:25)—something fabricated by man—is enshrined as truth.

Man's ignorance of God stems not from the lack of truth about God, but from the sinful human nature that will not receive the truth of God as the truth of God. Romans 1:20 says that the natural knowledge of God renders all humans accountable to God; they are "without excuse."

2 The Nearness of the Far-off God (Acts 14:15–17; 17:26–28)

Of what value can the natural knowledge of God be? If it only serves to show our ignorance and guilt, why bother with it? Two passages in the Book of Acts shed light on this question. In the first, St. Paul was speaking to people at Lystra. He said:

Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations He allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet He did not leave Himself without witness, for He did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with

food and gladness. (Acts 14:15–17)

Paul was making an appeal to these people to turn away from what he called "vain things" to God. Their "vain things" were all that they as men might regard as God. As sinful humans, they only knew God as other than He truly is. They viewed Him not according to the glory of His eternal power and divine nature, but rather as they imagined Him to be. They were thinking of God according to the lowliness of their mortal existence, which they demonstrated by proclaiming Paul and Barnabas to be Greek deities.

As we said before, all our falsehoods concerning God come about because of sin. In sin we doubt God's truth and incur His judgment. We cannot even consider the true and living God, because now, insofar as we may know by natural knowledge, He hates us. Even if He loved us, we could not know it, blinded as we are by the lie we have been seduced into believing. Therefore St. Paul told the Lystrans that the God who can be known by natural knowledge is there. But we have rebelled against Him and incurred his judgment, which includes His giving us over to our idols. Yet this is the same God who had shown goodness and generosity to them.

Of course, this statement by Paul was not the Gospel. It said nothing about the forgiveness of their sins. Rather, it was a witness to them of God. Paul told his hearers that God is not who they thought He was. Thus, he appealed to them to recognize the futility of their spiritual endeavors and confess that they did not really know God.

The second passage we should consider is Acts 17:26–28, which comes from Paul's speech at the Areopagus in Athens.

And He [God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward Him and find Him. Yet He is actually not far from each one of us, for "In Him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed His offspring."

God has ordered the circumstances of human life to show both His own existence and our ignorance of

Him. People see that God is here, but they don't know where to find Him. God orchestrates life so that in endless ways the forces and powers of the world cause them to seek for Him, yet their experience leads them to abandon their own knowledge as folly. Driven by God's hand, like blind men they stumble and reach out for what they do not know and cannot see.

3 The Law of God Written on the Human Heart (Romans 2:14–16)

When we talk about "natural knowledge of God," we should be clear on what we mean and on the basis for this knowledge in humankind. Romans 2:14–16 says:

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Paul was discussing the guilt of all humans. He began this chapter by speaking to Jews who believe that somehow their possession of the Law of Moses placed them in a better position before God than those who do not have that law, namely, the Gentiles. Yet if justification by the Law is the game anyone is trying to play, it is not simply "the hearers of the law" who would be justified but rather the "doers of the law" (Romans 2:13). When the Gentiles attempt to live moral lives, Paul continued, they demonstrate that within themselves—simply as human beings—a law is inscribed on their very nature.

The natural knowledge of God is not first something learned or acquired through the use of reason or deduction. Rather, natural knowledge of God is first something innate. This refers to the common notions and conceptions of the human mind with which all people are born.

Paul would have us understand that in their nature, all men are creatures of law—the law of their Creator. However, it does not follow that anyone *keeps* that law, for Paul goes on to say that their conscience either excuses or accuses them. They *live under constant judgment*, and thereby testify that they are breakers of the law. Whether people have the

Law of Moses or not, they nonetheless have a knowledge of God by their very nature. Humans know of God in their very being. Thus nature, within humankind as well as outside, gives witness of God's existence.

St. Paul made it clear in Romans that this knowledge is not simply an academic notion of the human mind. People try to justify themselves because they live with an awareness of God's presence, however much they try to deny and suppress it in their hearts.

4 Properly Using Natural Knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:4–5)

As Christians, we confess that our knowledge of God is *revealed* and that sinful human nature lacks both the true knowledge of God (Ephesians 4:18) and the power to know Him (1 Corinthians 2:12). What we believe, confess, and teach is graciously given to us by God through His Word. Our faith is not the result of personal judgments and investigation. It is the creation of God's Word, which makes known to us the truth of God in Jesus Christ. Without God's Word, we would never know Christ. What we are made to see by God's Word is sure and certain for no other reason than that it is God's Word bearing witness. We are given to *believe* the Word of God, not our own judgments about it. All that we ourselves know or think about God, however profound or pious, is falsehood. We cannot draw, shape, determine, or inform our knowledge of God from anything but His Word.

In 2 Corinthians 10:5, St. Paul wrote, "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." Here God's Word establishes for us that God's revelation centering in Christ is the rule of faith. Nothing else is: not human reason, experience, feelings, or anything else. God's truth is found and made known in Jesus Christ. Its authority is not to be challenged or rivaled by anything else.

Human reason, when set up as a standard of *divine truth* (i.e., of Christian doctrine), is said in this passage to be "raised against the knowledge of God." There can be no mistaking the force of these words. Any assertion of divine doctrine drawn from human reason amounts to an attempt to overthrow God and His Word. This does not mean, of course, that human reason has no place at all. If human reason had absolutely no place, thought

itself would be impossible, including thought about God. Yet divine doctrine, the truth and knowledge of God, is not something we have *from* or *on the basis of* human reason. We have it solely *from* and *on the basis of* God's revelation which centers in Christ.

Christ is the revelation of divine truth to us. In Him and from Him alone the true knowledge of God is given and received. Perhaps someone will object to this statement, saying that Scripture is our source of truth. But this is a false and unnecessary alternative. To say Scripture is our source of truth is really nothing else than to say that Christ is our source of truth. Christ (and particularly Christ crucified and risen for our justification) is the living content, sum, and substance of Scripture. What we encounter in Scripture is a proclamation of Him and a disclosure and exposition of the saving reality made known in Him. What we believe, teach, and confess has been shown to be true by and in Christ.

Does this mean then that we should dismiss human knowledge altogether? Does it suggest that we study nothing but Scripture, leaving science and the humanities to non-Christians as evil and works of the devil? Not at all! Knowledge and wisdom in the natural world are gifts from the Creator. They are not spiritual knowledge. They are, however, common to all men in various degrees and are given to serve our neighbor. When medical breakthroughs occur or advances in other fields of study take place and help solve problems in this world, we should receive all these things as gifts from God. We should acknowledge the natural genius and insight of non-Christians as endowments of the Creator and truly admire and value them. What we must never do, however, is fail to recognize that the acme of human knowledge remains completely shrouded in spiritual darkness. It remains capable only of error when it comes to the knowledge of God and all things spiritual and divine.

5 Supernatural Natural Theology (Psalm 19; 104; Hebrews 11:3)

Everything we've just said leaves many people with the impression that nothing good may come from the contemplation of God's works in nature. The heart and soul bound to Scripture would rightly object, though. Repeatedly, God's own Word portrays creation as a theater in which God exhibits His goodness and glory for men to see.

Consider two well-known psalms. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork." Similarly, Psalm 104 says things such as "He set the earth on its foundations, . . . You covered it with the deep as with a garment; . . . The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that You appointed for them" (vv. 5–8). In fact, Psalm 104 goes on in this vein, verse upon verse. No one can deny that these psalms say the works of nature reflect God's power and glory. These psalms typify the way Scripture bears witness to creation as the stage where God displays marvelous works and wonders and also the place where He wisely provides for all His creatures' needs.

However, these psalms do not render a mere human judgment. They are divine revelation. How do we see and know God rightly in nature? By His Word, which discloses what is shut out of mere natural knowledge.

Hebrews 11:3 says, "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." This faith is itself created by God in His Word. This Word comes to us with gracious saving power that opens our blind eyes and reveals to us God in Christ. In Christ, God shows Himself our friend. He is for us in every way, working to subdue sin and redeem us from its power.

This, of course, makes all the difference in our perception of things. Now the God of creation, whose presence in nature is hidden in fierce, awesome, sometimes terrible and terrifying works, is shown to be none other than the Christ who died for us. The sovereign hands of God were nailed to the cross for our salvation. Thus, they reveal themselves as almighty yet merciful hands that work only for our good. Only in Christ do we have the right and proper interpretation of creation. Ours is not merely a *theistic* worldview. It is a *Christian* worldview, centering in Christ.

Conclusion

Natural knowledge of God not only entails innate awareness of God's existence, but it also provides evidence of our sinfulness and guilt before God. Only after we have been renewed by the Holy Spirit through faith in the Gospel of our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ can we rightly apprehend God in our world.

Concluding Activities

Prayer: Gracious Father, thank You for sending the light of the true knowledge of Yourself into our hearts through Your blessed Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, and thus rescuing us from the darkness of our wicked minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Make any necessary announcements and distribute study leaflet 2.

The Christian Knowledge of God

**Matthew 16:13–17; 1 Corinthians 2:2–16;
Matthew 13:10–17; John 8:43–47;
Deuteronomy 6:4; 2 Corinthians 13:14;
Revelation 1:4–5; Matthew 28:19–20;
Ephesians 4:21–24; Luke 24:13–47;
John 6:44–45; 2 Corinthians 4:6**

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

The revealed knowledge of God is distinct from the natural knowledge of God. In this lesson we will learn what the revealed knowledge of God is and how and why it is peculiarly Christian.

Objectives

That participants, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, will be led to

1. discover that the Christian knowledge of God is revealed;
2. recognize the Christ-centered, trinitarian nature of this revealed knowledge; and
3. hear how this revelation is received through the means of grace.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 65.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Hymn accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. Some of

the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7. Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Holy Father, we thank You for giving us the knowledge of Yourself in Jesus Christ. Bless our study now and confirm our faith in Your Word as the truth, in the name of Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

1 The Word: The Source of Christian Knowledge (Matthew 16:13–17; 1 Corinthians 2:6–16)

Some years ago, a popular bumper-sticker slogan said, "I found it." People with this sticker were saying that they had found God. Sincere as this expression may have been, however, it was not a confession of Christian faith. Christian faith believes that it cannot believe in Christ, that is, not by its own reason or strength. What faith confesses, it confesses not as a matter of what the human mind has by its powers uncovered or judged to be true. Instead, Christian faith confesses what God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

In fact, faith comes only after the Law breaks the stubborn will and humbles the arrogant human mind. Repentance causes people to confess that they are utterly ignorant of God and that their hearts are given over to falsehood and idols. God's Word comes to men in this darkness in order to overcome it and give them the knowledge of the truth, the knowledge of God. This light is the truth of God shining forth in Christ. It comes from God, not ourselves. It carries with it its own enlightening power by the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit.

Many Christians regard the Bible as something of a puzzle that they must put together and understand. God has given His inscrutable Word, they think, and now

they have to busy themselves with piecing together what it means. But God's Word calls for *hearing ears*, not big brains. The psalmist testified: "The unfolding of Your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119:130). Jesus said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children" (Matthew 11:25). Notice that Jesus *thanked* His Father for this. He did not think it a tragedy that God had given His truth in His Word to "little children"—not those with the worldly wisdom of adult rationality, but those who simply receive what is given them as children.

After Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus answered, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). We should observe a few things here:

- a. Peter's knowledge of Christ did not have its source in "flesh and blood," that is, from the knowledge possible by mortal men. Human reason, senses, or experience did not enable Peter to know the person of Christ.
- b. Peter's knowledge came from the Father "who is in heaven." This is a heavenly gift, not an earthly one. God alone made this known to Peter.
- c. Christ was the *locus* (place) and *focus* of the Father's revelation. The revelation did not occur in abstraction but most concretely in the person of Jesus.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 2:12–13 the apostle wrote: "Now we have received not the spirit of the world [i.e., natural wisdom and knowledge], but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we [the apostles and prophets through whom God gave the Scriptures] impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit [the divinely inspired Scriptures], interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual."

The words of Scripture are not the words of men but of God. (See 1 Thessalonians 2:13.) They have come to us through men, but they originate with God. Since He is their author, these words reveal the mind of God. To think of Scripture as one would regard any other piece of literature (e.g., attributing its contents to tradition, personal opinion, or the influence of existing cultures), is to deny its verbal inspiration and effectively rob it of its divine authority.

2 Faith: The Way of Christian Knowledge (Matthew 13:10–17; John 8:43–47)

Reason and science are the two ways of natural knowledge. Faith is the way of Christian knowledge. Faith is trust in or belief in God and His Word. By means of His Word, God makes Himself known and works to create faith within us.

The only persons who have direct or immediate knowledge of God are the persons of the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27). The Son and the Father are not *revealed* to each other. They are *known* by each other. However, for anyone else to have knowledge, it must be revealed. It is revealed by the Son, the Word made flesh.

Faith is the believing reception of the revelation, which discloses God acting in Christ to save. Faith knows and trusts God as He has revealed Himself in His Word, a Word that comes to us from outside ourselves. God's Word that creates faith is the same Word received by saving faith, specifically, the *Word of the Gospel*. This Good News declares sinners forgiven and justified for Christ's sake.

When Jesus' disciples asked why He spoke to the crowds in parables, He answered:

To you it has been given to know the secrets [literally, *mysteries*] of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has [the truth as it has been received and known through the hearing of faith], more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not [lacking the believing reception of the truth], even what he has [the truth that was given to be believed but was not] will be taken away. . . . But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. (Matthew 13:11–12, 16)

Here our Lord spoke of faith as "given." Implicit was the idea of reception by those to whom the gift comes. What is given is possessed by the hearer and imparts its blessing of the knowledge of God as it is received. Faith is God's Word lodged within us.

Romans 10:17 says that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." In John 8:43, Jesus told the Jews: "Why do you not understand what I say? It

is because you cannot bear to hear My word." In this case "hearing" was not a mere external sensing of sounds. It was a heeding of what is said, a consent and a reception. The way of Christian knowledge comes to us from God's Word and through faith. Faith gives place to everything God says as His own truth. This is not due to decisions or determinations we have made, but because God has spoken to us His life-giving and redemptive Word. Since that Word resonates with divine authority and works in us with divine power, we believe it.

3 Trinitarian: The Form of Christian Knowledge (Deuteronomy 6:4; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Revelation 1:4-5)

You may be familiar with the Rorschach test used by psychologists. Subjects are shown a series of inkblot images and are asked to tell what comes to mind. The responses give some idea of the mind of the subject as they evoke from him or her primary concerns and dominant emotions. To a certain extent, the subjects project onto the images their own thoughts and feelings. However, one variable of the test involves the use of roughly discernable forms that can be commonly identified. It is the lack of the recognition of these that signals disorders and more acute problems.

We might use this to illustrate the way in which we are led by the Spirit to read the Scriptures. Apart from His illuminating work, we will project onto the Scriptures our own thoughts and beliefs. So long as *we* are interpreting Scripture, it is subject to us and our own understanding. Sin sees to it that we self-righteously read and hear God's Word in light of ourselves. Yes, we may use all the language of Scripture and be ever so sincerely pious and earnest in our efforts, even talking of evangelism, the cross, Jesus, and every holy thing. But so long as what we see and hear in Scripture is what our own eyes, ears, and minds have been able to discern, we will be doing little more than projecting. We will see nothing of the truth of God it contains and reveals.

On the other hand, when and as the Holy Spirit is our teacher, and by His gracious work of renewal we come to Scripture as penitent believers ready to receive the Word meekly, a definite form is shown us. The outline of God, as it were, becomes visible in His Word.

The Word of God has a trinitarian form. Jesus is the Father's Word made flesh (John 1:14), and the Father has spoken His last and best Word to the world by His Son

(Hebrews 1:2). Jesus, in turn, always speaks the Father's words and performs the Father's works (John 14:10). With the Father He sends us the Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26). The Spirit, in turn, is none other than the Spirit of the Father (Genesis 1:2) and the Son (Galatians 4:6). He witnesses of Jesus (John 16:12-15). When the persons of the Godhead act toward the created world, the three always work together.

God is one. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). With one person of the Trinity the other two are always found. For example, recall the apostolic benediction, 2 Corinthians 13:14: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Here we should note two things:

a. The Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus Christ are placed on par with God. Now, in Scripture God never shares His glory with anyone (Isaiah 48:11) and His place is not shared by anyone else. In the apostolic benediction, though, the Son and the Holy Spirit are named right along with God the Father, who is the second person named! Thus, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, right along with God the Father.

b. The apostolic benediction speaks of each of the persons doing saving actions and granting blessings of salvation as only God can. Love is no less a factor in our salvation than grace. Communion with the Holy Spirit cannot be anything less than communion with God Himself, or else this passage would be showing us something other than the salvation wrought by God.

Similarly, in Revelation 1:4-5, we are bidden grace not merely from "God," but, it says, from "Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth." The one gift of grace comes from all three persons at once. Although these designations are put in terms of the apocalyptic symbolism in this book, they unmistakably point us to the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

The great Aaronic benediction of Numbers 6:22-24 also speaks of the Holy Trinity: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace." The thrice-referenced *Lord* is the triune God, who blesses us with His entire being. The

Father preserves and keeps what He made; in the Son, we have God's gracious forgiveness; and the Holy Spirit brings the peace of God into our hearts and minds.

4 Baptism: The Beginning of Christian Knowledge (Matthew 28:19–20; Ephesians 4:21–24)

It might seem a bit contradictory to speak of Baptism as the *beginning* of Christian knowledge after having mentioned Scripture as the *source* of Christian knowledge. Is this a distinction without a difference? Certainly the difference is not absolute. One could begin with God's Word as easily as with Baptism. Both proclaim the same Gospel.

Nevertheless, Baptism comes first. To be sure, one may be brought to faith in Christ apart from Baptism through the preached or read Word, just as much as through Baptism. However, those who encounter the Word "out of the water," as it were, will hear in it that Christ awaits them in Baptism to give them the seal and confirmation of His promise. In the oral Word, they've heard of God's forgiving love that has saved them and brought them into Christ's Church. This Church has a visible existence on earth. Baptism is the rite and means Christ instituted by which God's grace is dispensed to people through visible means. In Baptism, a person is marked as one who before God *and His people* has been forgiven and received into fellowship.

Then the lifelong study of God's Word begins, as Christ said: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, [by] baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20). In this command to "make disciples," Baptism comes before teaching. The teaching and learning of the Scriptures follow Baptism. There are some important reasons for this.

a. Baptism gives us a full disclosure of God. It does not begin us on a search for Him. God makes Himself fully and definitively known by "the name [note: not *names*, plural, but *name*, singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." We do not discover the Holy Trinity along the way. We know this God from the start of our Christian life. Baptism gives us the right "take" on God. All further instruction in the Scriptures will be

for us a further unfolding of the faith into which we have been baptized.

b. In Baptism we are made God's children, adopted by the Father (Galatians 3:26–27). We call God our Father because in Baptism we put on Christ and are made to share in His Sonship. Therefore we listen to His Word as faith-filled sons.

c. In Baptism we are joined to Jesus in His death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–5). As with Luther, when doubts assail me and I may feel quite unsaved, I can remember how God's own work and promise have been applied to me, saying: "But I am baptized!"

d. In Baptism the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us (John 3:5; Acts 2:38). Here we are truly baptized with the Spirit (Matthew 3:11; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Baptism forms the basis of all spirituality in our lives.

e. Baptism roots us in the grace of God and makes the Christian life not a quest for righteousness but a celebration, confession, and trust in the righteousness of Christ that we have by faith. We are not on probation. Baptism is God's enduring promise that our sins are forgiven and we are immersed in His love in Christ now and forever.

In Ephesians 4:21–24, St. Paul wrote:

You . . . were taught . . . as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

The appeal made here is to Baptism. They were taught that God had put to death the old Adam and had raised humanity to new life in Christ's resurrection. This is not something they did. God did it in Jesus. The exhortation to "put off" was not calling for them actually to do this themselves, but rather to recognize in their hearts and minds that this already had been done for them. They were being called to live in the reality of their Baptism through repentance and faith. Unbelief nullifies the grace of God, but in faith they applied to themselves God's great gift of Baptism all over again.

All the old notions of what God was like and of what righteousness and holiness are, were put off as full of error and darkness ("deceitful"). In their place stands the truth of God revealed in Jesus. In our Baptism, this truth

shows itself to be that the one God is indeed three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

5 Jesus Christ: The Focus of Christian Knowledge (Luke 24:13–47; John 6:44–45; 2 Corinthians 4:6)

As we have noted, Jesus is no less God than the Father or the Spirit. He is the person of the Holy Trinity who makes known and opens to us the other two.

In our creeds, the Father is mentioned first, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit. One of these persons leads to another since they are all at once one and the same God, although distinct persons. The Father gives the Son, who bears witness of the Father, and together from them proceeds the Holy Spirit, who bears witness of the Son who bears witness of the Father, who gives the Son. Things are different for us, though, since we are not members of the Godhead. Our knowledge of God comes only in the way He has revealed Himself.

It is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, who is God's revelation to man. The Son is none other than the Father's "Word." Thus, to hear or see the Father one must always and only look to the Son. As Jesus Himself put it:

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, "And they will all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me—not that anyone has seen the Father except He who is from God. (John 6:44–46)

We must not overlook the profound implications of what our Lord said in these words.

- a. The Father draws men to Jesus.
- b. By coming to Jesus, we learn of the Father.
- c. Jesus alone has seen the Father. Therefore, it is by hearing Him that we hear and learn from the Father.

It is likewise with the Spirit. When He speaks, He speaks only the Father's Word. He speaks Jesus (John 16:13–14). Thus we are told quite explicitly in 2 Corinthians 4:6 that God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." There are people who teach that the Spirit's work of illumination either comes apart from Scripture or concerns truth other than that revealed and made known in Jesus.

They misrepresent the Spirit's ministry and obscure the glory of Christ. It is in the "face of Jesus" that the light of truth comes. To be sure, this light reveals to us the Spirit and the Father. Yet the revelation of them comes not separate from Jesus, but in and through Him.

Therefore we must maintain the Christ-centeredness of our hearing and study of Scripture. Jesus as the Word made flesh discloses that He is the Bible's true content and meaning. In Luke 24:13–47, when Jesus opened the Scriptures first to the two men on the road to Emmaus and then afterwards to the disciples, He taught that He is the fulfillment of the Scriptures:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (v. 27)

Then He said to them, "These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. (vv. 44–45)

First Jesus established with them that the Scriptures concern Him, the Messiah. Scripture has its fulfillment in Him. Only then did He follow by opening their understanding. Their faith and attention had to be directed to Him as the living incarnation of God's Word.

Conclusion

The Christian knowledge of God comes to us by way of special divine revelation. This revelation is the disclosure of truth in words that convey to us God Himself. Faith alone is the way to hear and receive these words.

Christian knowledge of God has God's Word as its source, faith as its way, and Baptism as its beginning. The shape of this Christian knowledge is trinitarian, and it focuses on our Lord Jesus Christ.

Concluding Activities

Prayer: Gracious Father, thank You for sending the light of the true knowledge of Yourself into our hearts through Your blessed Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, and for rescuing us from the darkness of our wicked minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Make any necessary announcements and distribute study leaflet 3.