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Looking in

Aim

To encourage group members to enter fully into the assurance and spiritual liberty that they are saved for eternity through the blood of Christ shed once for all upon the cross, and to help them to see what 'repentance' in the Christian life involves.

Background briefing

If you want to get something out of an experience you have to put something in. If you are going to compete in a race, you need to train to get fit. If you are travelling to another country, you are wise if you read up about it so you will know what to do and where to go when you get there. It is the same with Holy Communion. If it is going to be meaningful, you need to prepare first. The video spells out some aspects of this. We need to build what it says on a wider foundation of faith.

Who God is

All readers of the Bible know that there is an apparent difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God revealed as the Father of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Of course, there is no real difference. There are warm descriptions of God's love and care in the Old, and there are strong warnings about his judgement in the New. But, in practice, Christians tend either to stress God's judgement or his love. Even if we say we stress both, we still tend to give one of them more emphasis. Our imperfect and inadequate human mind finds it hard to hold them in equal tension.

So when we look at God's attitude to human sin, it is especially important to see how God views those who belong to him, however imperfect they are in their daily lives. For example:

- they are 'accepted in the beloved' (Ephesians 1:6, KJV);
- they are eternally safe in God's hands (John 10:28,29);
- God positively delights in his people, like a proud parent (Isaiah 62:4; 65:19);
- he even goes to extreme lengths to bring them back when they stray from him (Luke 15:4-7).

This perspective is vital pastorally. Many Christians lack real assurance that they are eternally forgiven. They are afraid of God in the wrong sense. They do not rejoice in being his children. But this is not how God intends us to be. His judgement is real for those who do not acknowledge him. It is also real for those who deliberately and without regret turn their backs on him (that is, those who commit apostasy). But for his children, who like all children get into trouble and do wrong things, his attitude is one of unending, accepting love. Their sins do not make them any less his children. They are not thrown out of the family every time they do wrong, even if they live under a cloud for a while and miss out on some of the Father's 'treats'.

What God requires

The central truth of the Bible is that God is a covenant-keeping God. That is, he makes an agreement with his people that he will be their God and they will be his special people. Like all agreements or contracts, it has small print. God's people cannot do what they want. If they wish to enjoy the benefits of God's covenant love, they must obey God's covenant laws. That is true as much for Christians in the New Testament era as it was for believers in the Old Testament era.

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God's covenant law is summed up in the ten commandments (Exodus 20:1–17). These commandments are sometimes read at the communion service. Jesus did not abolish them. In his summary of the law (Mark 12:28–31, also used in the communion service), Jesus showed how they sum up the way in which God's people are to behave.

However, the commandments are not just rules for the religious. They show what God requires of everyone. They are the working manual of human society. At the end of the world each person who ever lived will be judged by God on the basis of how they measured up to them (Revelation 20:12,13). Inevitably, then, all will be pronounced 'Guilty' (Romans 3:23). But the Christian's sins are no longer a barrier between him or her and God, for Jesus has taken them away (1 Peter 2:24). God then sees the Christian as clothed with the righteousness of Christ (Romans 4:23,24; 8:1), and that is what it means to be 'accepted in the Beloved' (Ephesians 1:6, KJV).

For Christians who pledge themselves to love and serve God (however imperfectly they do that), there is not a judgement in this sense, but more of an assessment. There can be no punishment for Christians (as those who believe in purgatory suggest) because Jesus has already carried that for us on the cross once and for all. His work there is finished. He has paid the full price for our sin. Paul hints at this assessment in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15. Even the Christian whose life has produced no lasting fruit for God or people will 'be saved' – only their wasted efforts will be 'burned up' in the judgement fire.

Our response

That, in a nutshell, is why we are called in the communion service to 'be thankful'. We have much to be thankful for. We have been spared judgement. We are free from the curse of sin and death. We have access to God through Jesus. He hears and answers our prayers. He has given us 'his holy and life-giving Spirit' so we can live victoriously and fruitfully for him on earth.

This is where repentance comes in. To repent means to turn our back on our old way of life. We need to do that often, because time and again parts of our old life without God assert themselves and cause us to sin. We are new creatures in Christ, yet we are still old humans without the benefit of the perfect resurrection body, mind and spirit. So we struggle (as Paul says we will, in Romans 7:7–25). And when we struggle, we sometimes fall. We need to look at ourselves each time we come to communion, to give ourselves a spiritual health check, as it were. Not because we are going to be rejected eternally by God but because we soil the occasion and treat our host at the table with disrespect. That is what Paul means by 'eating and drinking judgement' (1 Corinthians 11:29). The Corinthians were treating their salvation lightly, and were treating each other with contempt. Their communion was a chaos. God was not pleased. Indeed, he was angry. We cannot receive his blessing if we act in such a way. We can only expect him to withdraw our privileges.

Group session

Ice breaker

Collect a few DIY manuals or craft instruction books. Split into small groups or pairs and give each group a book. Ask them to choose a task and make a complete list of everything that has to be done *before* the 'real' work can actually begin. (For example, scraping and sanding needs to be done before painting – but don't forget things like choosing the colour and buying the paint! As an alternative, or as one of the options, you could use a sports training manual – what does a professional athlete or team player have to do before the big day?) Get them to read out their lists. Discuss the following:

- What don't people like about this preparatory work?
- Why do many people try to rush it?
- What happens when we don't do it properly?

This session looks at the way we can get ready to serve God and to meet with him in the communion service.

Bible study

- 1 Read John 6:26–59 as a group. Spend a few minutes drawing out the following:
 - What verses can you find that speak of the Christian's eternal assurance?
 - What does it mean in practical terms to 'eat the flesh' and 'drink the blood' of Jesus? How do we actually *do* it? (While this may include an allusion to the Holy Communion, the spiritual dynamic is one of depending upon him for spiritual nourishment – so what does *that* mean?)
- 2 Now split into a couple of 'buzz groups' and give each group one of the following tasks:
 - What does the Bible tell us about assurance of salvation? Look up John 10:28,29; Hebrews 10:11–18; 1 John 4:16–18; 5:12.
 - What does the Bible tell us about sin in the Christian life and how we are to think about it and react to it? Look up Romans 6:1,2,15–18; 1 Corinthians 10:12,13; 1 John 1:6 – 2:2.
- 3 Come back as a whole group and share your findings. Discuss together how you would counsel someone who was a Christian, who had sinned and thought that they were beyond redemption. (This would be best done as a role play, asking one member of the group to act the part of the person in question.)

Video discussion

Quotations from the Scriptures

Philippians 3:7–9
1 Corinthians 11:27–29

Play the video. Afterwards, give group members time to reflect on it and to raise questions about it. What did they find illuminating? What was new? What was puzzling? (Try to deal with questions as they arise. If there are no questions, or after you have dealt with them if there is still time, continue the discussion with some of these topics.)

- 1 What do you think Paul means when he writes about 'sinning against the body and blood of the Lord'? (See 1 Corinthians 11:27–29 and background briefing.)

- 2 If we waited until we felt worthy of receiving communion, we would wait until after we had died! How would you counsel someone who hangs back from receiving communion through a sense of their human unworthiness?
- 3 This may be an appropriate time to consider the services themselves, and how you feel they help express biblical truths. (See 'Search the service' box below.)
- 4 How might we tell the difference between someone who is not a Christian at all (that is, has never come to Christ for forgiveness in the first place) and someone who is suffering from a lack of assurance? (It is possible that some groups will have people in one or both categories. It is important to be very sensitive to people at this point, and not to jump to conclusions or become preachy. The gospel is not a formula; it is a personal relationship. As with human relationships, it involves growth of trust and knowledge, as well as acts of commitment at different stages in its development.)

Application

- 1 Depending on the nature of your group, you could either go round and ask each person to share spontaneously what Christ means to them now, or give this task as 'homework' for them to write a couple of sentences and bring them to share next time. (Discourage historical testimonies; how a person came to faith is often less important than what effect their faith has on their daily life now.)
- 2 What does it mean to trust Christ as one's Saviour and truly to 'repent'? When you have discussed this, go on to ask people to answer the question, 'So what?' What difference does this fact make in one's daily life? In other words, how is repentance to be expressed outwardly?
- 3 How can we better prepare ourselves for Holy Communion? Draw up a list of practical ideas that people could apply in readiness for your church's next communion service.

Prayer and worship

Without being morbid, spend time reflecting on the fact that we consistently fall short of God's will and standard of holiness. Then spend time praising him for the fact that, nonetheless, he forgives his people and delights in his children's love and service.

Search the service

- 1 One of the features in *Common Worship* is a service of preparation before communion. Most people today just turn up without giving it much thought. How might you better prepare yourself for communion?
- 2 The recitation of the commandments in the *Book of Common Prayer* and (in various forms) in the *Alternative Service Book* and *Common Worship* was intended, together with the Ministry of the Word, to provide opportunity for self-examination during the earlier part of the service, before approaching the Lord's Table. What use do you *really* make of them?

WORKSHEET SESSION 3 **Looking in**

1 How do you think you should prepare yourself to come to Holy Communion?

2 Why might it be important to prepare yourself carefully?

3 In what ways do you think receiving communion can strengthen your assurance of belonging to Jesus?

4 What difference do you think coming to Holy Communion should make to your daily life?

5 How would you explain to a friend what it means to 'feed' on Jesus at the Holy Communion?

'Every good and faithful Christian feels in himself how he feeds of Christ, eating his flesh and drinking his blood. For he puts the whole hope and trust of his redemption and salvation in that only sacrifice, which Christ made upon the cross ... And this great benefit of Christ the faithful person earnestly considers in his mind, chews and digests it with the stomach of his heart, spiritually receiving Christ into him, and giving again himself wholly to Christ.'

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer