

# Who are we and how do we believe?

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## Introduction speech



A few years ago, I kept a devotion at a penal institution. I was aware that many other representatives of various religious institutions had visited there before. I began the devotion by talking about myself, my family, and by whom I was sent for the visit. I wanted to focus the devotion on explaining how I believe through the teachings of the Bible. In the beginning of the devotion, I read the following text from the book of Corinthians, "Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God." 2. Cor 5:20.

There were four men listening to the devotion. One of them approached me and was critical about what I had said. Towards the end of the devotion, one listener surprisingly said that he wanted to believe as I had taught. I blessed the man with the Gospel. When I was saying my farewells to Him, he requested that I return again soon. Faith differs from different religions or religiousness. There are many ways of understanding religiousness, those who believe differently, and religious institutions with various teachings on this Earth, and in our Country. About one third of people in Finland do not officially belong to any religious institution. Religiousness is a concept, which explains matters related to religion or to people in whose lives religion plays a significant role. Faith, on the other hand, is very personal, and a gift received from God.

We believe that God chooses partakers of the gift of faith. The choice is not dependent on religion or religiousness, language, race or citizenship. Every child born into this world receives the gift of faith already in the womb. The proclamation of God, His plan unto salvation and order of Grace have already been written in the Bible. Even at the beginning of the new covenant, there were different religions, religiousness, and teachings. Amongst the people there were many different spiritual teachers. Paul taught in a different way from others, and clearly wanted to protect God's children from wrong teachings. He writes: "But through we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Gal 1:8.

Paul had experienced repentance and approached those believing in the same way as Him living in Corinth with a letter. The letter was not pan-Christian, so as to say, intended for all Christians or religious people. In the beginning of the letter, he tells of himself and outlines who the letter is intended for. Paul greets the congregation saying: "Paul called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ." 1. Cor 1:1-3.

Who are we and how do we believe? What do we teach and what differentiates us from others? We are Christian children of God in this world of people. We are members of the Lutheran Church of Finland, as is the case with 2/3 of approximately 5.5 million Finns. The same Biblical faith connects us in our State Church. We have received the priceless gift of the name of a child of God, and everything that comes with it. John rejoiced about his name as a child of God, and wrote about his joy, saying: "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed us, that we should be called the children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him." 1. Joh 3:1.

The world cannot distinguish us from other religious people on this Earth. We are not called or recognized as children of God. Most refer to us as a religious group or movement amongst all others that are as such. In Finland, we are called 'Conservative' Laestadians. The name given to us mainly helps others to distinguish us regarding the teachings of our faith in relation to others.

God has only one correct faith, gospel, and message. When we speak of Biblical faith, the Bible emphasizes unity. Religions and religiousness can be in different formats, but faith is as one. Paul writes: "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Eph 4:3-6.

On the basis of the Bible portion mentioned, we believe that there is only one group of children of God, to whom the Bible is taught in one unified way, in any place, city, or country. From the outside, we cannot be distinguished from other people. Overall, we behave and dress as others do. We go to work and attend to society's duties as we wish to. Because of the sin that lives in us, temptations, faults, and incorrect behaviour are also seen in us. We cannot avoid sin and its influence. John confesses sinfulness by, writing: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." 1 Joh. 1:8.

We believe and confess and Paul did, that we are not capable of doing that good which we would desire. Paul explains His sinfulness and wretchedness as such: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I will to do, I do not do: but the evil which I will not do, that I do. Now if I do that I will not, it is no more that I do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." Rom 7:18-20. God's children are everywhere in the world. There are many that believe in the same way as us here in Finland, and also in other parts of the world. We have experienced the unity of the family of the Holy Spirit for example in Sweden, North America, Africa and Russia.

God has allowed us to know about believers in other parts of the world. Only God knows where all in the world there are partakers of living faith. We live and work together as a community. We are in different countries, in differently organized societies, according to the law. We have organized our activities and put up places of gathering in different places, mostly to arrange services. In Finland, we use the name: 'Association of Peace.' For example, the church in Helsinki goes by the name 'Helsinki's Association of Peace.'

According to the name of our organization, we own the peace of God, and offer it unto others. We also want to live peacefully amongst others. When we work together, we also form a community in various places. Sometimes, those who have given up faith may also be a part of the functions of the community. Participating in the community or being a part of it, by being a Laestadian, one is not automatically righteous. For this, a living faith of the heart gifted by God, is needed.

We meet those who believe differently in our daily lives. Even Paul met those who believed differently on his mission trips, and he spoke with them. He wanted to separate those living in Corinth who believe in the same way from other teachings in Christ's name by saying "as us." We do not feel the unity of the spirit with those who believe differently. The feeling of unity is a gift of faith, received through faith. Even though we believe differently, we interact with the world every day, working together and serving our Fatherland.

We want to be builders of peace and abide by the instruction given by Paul to the children of God in Rome. He says: "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." Rom 12:18. Our task is to preach the Gospel. We do not want to argue or fight with those who believe differently. We

respect the convictions of those who believe differently. There are also those who do not believe as we do, but regardless, support and respect the way in which we believe.

In the Gospel of Mark the Bible explains a situation, when the disciples met a man who believed in Jesus in a different way, and made the mistake of obstructing his actions. In the Gospel of Matthew, this is described in the following way, "And John answered him saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in Thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbad him, because he followeth not us." Mark 9:38. Jesus did not accept the way in which the disciples behaved and rebuked them, saying "But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me." Mark 9:39-40. Instead, God promised a reward to those who were on the side of Christ, not on that of the disciples. Jesus said: "For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward." Mark 9: 41.

The reward which God can give unto a person is to make Him Christ's own and to grant Him eternal life. Living faith unites us to be a living congregation. Spiritually, an organization, association, or communality does not unite us. The happenings of the morning of the new covenant, the Holy Spirit gathered God's own to be a living congregation. On the First Pentecost, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a change was noticed in the lives and activities of the children of God, when the unity between believers and partaking in Christ's congregation was born. Jesus had predicted the birth of the church, when the Holy Spirit comes to be amongst children of God, gathers the congregation, and becomes their teacher.

Jesus said; "These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you. But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whosoever I have said unto you." Joh. 14:25-26. The followers of Jesus were witnesses of Christ, and their duty was to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins unto all men. The gospel message states: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Mark 16:15

Paul instructed his brother Timothy, how one should behave with the gospel amongst the congregation. He describes the congregation as being a pillar rooted in the words of the Bible, which contains the truth, Christ. The duty of the congregation is to have Christ present everywhere in the world. Paul writes to Timothy: "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." 1. Tim 3:15. All those who receive Christ's gospel and who are baptized, become living members of Christ's congregation, and are called into to preach the gospel message.

Faith and love through the Holy Spirit connected believers to be one and the same, pillars grounded in the teachings of the Bible, the living congregation of God. Another task of the congregation is to take care of those who have received the gift of faith. Those who have received the same gift of faith desire, thorough faith, to gather together, to listen to the Word of God. As children of God, we need the support of one another. Our will is to remain in the correct teachings of Christ. The acts of the Apostles speak of the early congregation and their activity as such: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking bread, and in prayers." Acts 2:42.

At the base of all of our functions are service gatherings, which are open for everyone. At services, the Bible is in focus for reading and studying. Biblical sermons are made alive with the Holy Spirit, calling those on the outside to God's Word and his Law, and strengthening the faith of those who are already partakers of this faith. Service functions are supported by activities, book releases and recordings, designed for different target groups.

The spiritual Family of God is a group of God's children, separated from the World. Paul writes to the Ephesians: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the Saints, and of the household of God." Eph 2:19. This parable is not only a guiding image. It is clearly guiding us towards the correct doctrine. Every person on the earth knows what it means to be of the same family in relation to our relationships, to be a sister or brother to another. It cannot be said that one is a part of God's family, if they do not spiritually feel that they have found other members of the family, brothers and sisters. God's family has a Father, Mother, sisters and brothers. Belonging to God's family is a personal experience of being a partaker of faith.

We can feel through faith that we are God's Children in God's Family. God is our true Father, the congregation is the caring Mother, and in the same way, our brothers and sisters in Faith. Jesus also belongs to God's Family as our brother. Jesus was told that his mother Mary and his temporal brothers were outside, and wanted to meet him. The reaction of Jesus is described in the Gospel of Matthew in the following way: "Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? And who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren (prethren)!" Matt 12:47-50.

We live in the world, but we are not of the world. We do not want to live according to the ways of the world, and to love this world. We want to live out Paul's instruction to the children of God in Rome. He says: "And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Rom. 12:2.

We are strangers in this World, and John warns about loving the perishing world. He warns us: "Do not love the world or things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - is not of the Father but is of the world." 1. John 2:15-16. We are sinful like the rest of the people on this Earth, but our faith makes us want to fight against the temptation of sin. We own righteousness as a gift through Christ's work of salvation, and Christ is present in us through faith in our temptations. God's child is a new creation, and Paul teaches us: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new." 2. Cor. 5:17.

Through Christ, we are worthy, and travel as God's children. Salvation by faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone. As a result of our faith our values and habits may differ from those lifestyles of others, Faith guides our values and our lifestyle choices. This is made apparent through, for example, our attitudes about alcohol, depraving entertainment, wrong kind of sexuality, and worldly life. We need God's endless grace in every moment of our lives. We fall into sin, and this is why God has granted us the gift of preaching of atonement, the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins.

Only in the Gospel is the strength of God. Even during Paul's pilgrimage, his strength was the same Gospel which we have. He writes to the Romans: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." Rom. 1:16. We own the Gospel as a gift through the Holy Spirit; the center of our faith, the word and preaching of salvation.

As preachers of the Gospel of salvation, we can through Christ's order and through the strength of the Holy Spirit, preach the forgiveness of sins unto another. Jesus gave this privilege to his own, saying: "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." John 20:23.

In our proclamation and teachings is recognized the preaching of absolution in Jesus' name and blood. Why in Jesus' name? The Bible says: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven among men, whereby we must be saved." Acts 4:12. Why in Jesus' name? The Bible says: "And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission." Hebr. 9:22. Sin leads into conflict with God, and the Gospel resolves this conflict. A child of God living in the world is sinful, but is in peace with God because of the salvation work of Christ. We want to speak of our salvation, because God wants that all people would receive salvation and would receive the gift, which we have received. Jesus instructs: "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers (lepers), raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give." Matt 10:8.

We have been given the duty and the Word to preach salvation to those, who feel that they are in conflict with God. We hope that everyone who feels that they have sins would receive forgiveness, and thus peace with Christ. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their tresspasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. 2. Cor 5:18-20

At the center of everything is faith in Christ prepared by God through His son. God grants faith as a gift by grace to his people. Faith is not comprehensible with a temporal mind. It is very personal, and God chooses those whom He gives it to. In the Letter to the Romans it is said: "For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Rom. 9:15. Faith is through the Holy Spirit also shared, because the same Spirit of God gathers an invisible congregation of the children of God. In the explanation of the Apostolic Creed, Luther teaches: "I believe that on this Earth is the holy small flock, and a congregation of Christ, gathered together by the Holy Spirit..." (Catechism)

the perfect sacrifice of Christ, and God's image are very central to our faith. The falling into sin in Paradise shattered God's image in man. Temptation given by the devil leads a person away from God and His righteousness. Returning to a connection with God and to his salvation is only possible because of the salvation work of Christ, making it possible to heal God's image in man. He writes: "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." 2. Cor 4:4.

A partaker in Christ's sacrifice owns justifying faith, and he is God's image in Christ. A child of God sees Christ's forgiving face through the eyes of faith, which are opened by the Gospel. When we hear the living Gospel, Christ turns his face unto the sinful man, and grants us peace, as we pray in the Lord's prayer. Only God can help man to search for and to find God in himself. A person cannot himself believe or find God, or to search or even to desire to seek him. Paul writes: "There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God." Rom 3:10-11.

God grants times of visitation through his love and righteousness. One cannot find God or desire to seek for him otherwise. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near." Isaiah 55:6. God's child is spiritually alive, but may die when sin overcomes him. A spiritual death is the result of sin. The living Gospel can awaken one spiritually dead to be alive again. Through time, God has awakened the spiritually dead because of their transgressions and sin, yet again to be living children of God. Even during our times.

Paul writes to the Ephesians who were granted the grace of repentance; "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." Eph 2:1. We have seen through times how this is true. There are those who have fallen away from living faith because of sin. To our joy, we have also seen how many have been granted the grace of repentance, becoming alive from their spiritually dead state. We believe that this shows the impact of the living congregation of God, even during our time. A child of God is, at the same time, sinful and righteous. The Holy Spirit and the Devil, through the flesh, are influencing those who believe in the Word of God. The spirit and our flesh are in constant battle with one another. This battle is called the fight of faith, which we can win only through Christ. Paul writes: "For the flesh lusteth (laasteth) against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." Gal 5:17.

The Holy Spirit received as a gift of faith, creates the fruits of faith in a child of God. Paul writes to the congregation of Galatians: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law." Gal 5:22-23. We often do not recognize these fruits within ourselves, because sin lives in us. The power of the enemy is present through our flesh. The presence of our fruits of faith is clearly influenced by the deeds of our flesh. Paul continues: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like." Gal 5:19-21. We can recognize the undesired influences of these in ourselves, and in our lives. God's children have been sent to preach of the Kingdom of God. A Kingdom is formed there, where children of God are open messengers. Jesus sent his disciples to do this work, saying: "And into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you: And heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you." Luke 10:8-9.

God's Kingdom, which we are to preach of, is eternal, invisible, and extends throughout the world. It is the grace Kingdom among us, and its coming or presence cannot be defined. Jesus responds: "And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the Kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Luke 17:20-21.

The eternal and undefeated Kingdom of God is the Kingdom in heaven. God wants that every person can make it to heaven at the end of their life. All of God's Saints, living and dead, are members of the Kingdom of God through Christ. Every child who is born into this world, is born into the Kingdom of God. Christ, who was born and lived in the form of man, prepared righteousness and a place in the Kingdom of God to every child, already in the womb of their mother.

It is said in the Psalms: "The eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them." Ps 139:16. Christ is the way, opened from conception. And the way unto heaven travels through life through the valley of death. In death, God's child is moved unto the Kingdom of Glory in heaven, to Abraham's feet. Paul confessed before the governor to be a traveler of this way, when he was blamed to be the leader of the heresy of Nazareth: "But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets," Acts 24:14.

The Grace Kingdom on Earth is the invisible congregation of God. A child of God lives in the Grace Kingdom amidst this world, in the care of the Mother Congregation. Paul teaches; "But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all." Gal. 4:26. In the invisible and unwavering congregation

which extends through the world, the Holy Spirit guides every one of its members in the same way. Christ's teachings are the same, no matter the culture, language, or skin colour.

Through heaven's grace travels the way prepared by Christ unto the glory of Heaven. The New Jerusalem has been made in heaven and descended on Earth to be near people. The Grace Heaven, invisible congregation, descending from heaven to be amongst people was shown to John in the revelation of the Patmos Cave. He speaks about what he saw, saying: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God." Rev. 21:1-3.

Christ has promised to be amongst his own in different countries and places, in the visible and living congregation, even with all of its short-comings. He shows himself to us through other children of God. In the world, its countries and in different areas, we are to find a visible congregation. As with the early congregation, the flock of the children of God in Christ is made of people. The enemy has planted weeds amongst the good seed of the word of God. We can thus see our sinfulness and faultiness in the life and functions of the living congregation.

The disciples who traveled with Jesus doubted and argued amongst themselves about who is the greatest, were desperate, and fled when Jesus was captured. The parable of Jesus about the good seed and weeds was a picture of the growth of good and evil in God's Kingdom. "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away." Matt 13:24-25.

The evil and wrongful growth in the living and faulty congregation is only defined at the end of times. Jesus promises: "The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity." Matt 13:41. The living congregation can be recognized from its unified and mutual love for Christ, and the other members of the body of Christ. Jesus says; "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." Joh 13:35.

We need the support of other children of God while traveling on Heaven's Way. In the living and temporal congregation of believers, the children of God are escorts to one another. After the High Priest Joshua received the Grace of Repentance, he was not left alone. He was given concrete people to be his escorts, who lived and traveled nearby. In the Book of Zechariah, it is said: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; If they wilt walk in my ways, and if thou wilt keep my charge, then thou shalt also judge my house, and shalt also keep my courts, and I will give thee places to walk among these that stand by." Zec 3:7.

Why did we want to tell you this, and what are we hoping would happen? I hope that there are those listening to this sermon, who can unite in what they have heard. There can also be those, who do not unite in the message, think differently, or perhaps even act critically to our teachings. It is understandable and Biblical. Paul says: "for all men have not faith." 2. Tess 3:2.

I hope that your heart has been pricked in the same way as those in Jerusalem during the first Pentecost. Lucas says about the miracle of Pentecost; "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the

remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." Acts 2:37-39.

John the Baptist predicted how after him shall come he who does not baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit. This has come true, and we proclaim the baptism of the Holy Ghost in the blood of Jesus Christ. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is in the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. There is the promise of the forgiveness of our sins. If you desire, you can now also believe. If you feel that you are looking for peace and that God is calling you, you have received a time of visitation as a gift from God.

I encourage you to approach Christ on his mercy seat with the words from the Letter to Hebrews; "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." Hebr 4:16. Now is the right time to ask for his help. The Kingdom of God is approaching you, and the living gospel is offered unto you. You can believe all of your sins forgiven in Jesus Name and Blood, in the living gospel preached unto you. I want to also say to you, dear brother and sister, who owns the gift of faith, but feel yourself sinful and faulty. The same gospel seeks for, finds, and is offered for you. Believe your sins forgiven in our Saviour, in his name and his blood.