

UNBELIEVING FRIENDS

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14)

Talking to your unbelieving friends can be difficult. The passage above seems to present a problem that makes it harder. How can I get my unbelieving friends to believe when they can't understand what I am saying? How do they get the Holy Spirit in order to understand the truth, so that I can speak the truth to them?

My framing of the problem is really the problem. There is no sequence of the Holy Spirit coming and then the truth. It does not happen that the Holy Spirit is received and then the truth of God's Word is received. Rather, Christ gives us His Holy Spirit with His Word. Our Lord's words are Spirit-filled. Jesus said that His words are "Spirit and life" (John 6:63). Therefore, the Holy Spirit is received with the truth, with God's Word. In fact, we cannot expect to receive the Holy Spirit apart from God's Word and the Sacraments, which are God's "visible" Word. Luther wrote, "We should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of his external Word and sacrament" (SA III VIII:10).

When it comes to an unbeliever, God prepares that person for conversion through His law - His commandments. All people have an innate knowledge of God's law through having a conscience. This is called the natural knowledge of God. However, people deny this knowledge and pervert it. But when God's law as revealed in Holy Scripture is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit convicts and allows no denial of what is good, right, and holy. It says in our Lutheran Confessions, "The Spirit of Christ must not only comfort but through the function of the law must also 'convict the world of sin' [John 16:8]. Thus, in the New Testament the Holy Spirit must perform (as the prophet says in Isaiah 28:2) "alien" work - which is to convict - until He comes to His "proper" work - which is to comfort and to proclaim grace. For this reason, Christ obtained the Spirit for us and sent Him to us," (FC SD V:11).

First the law is proclaimed, and then the Gospel. It is through the Gospel that God works conversion, or brings people to faith and life in Christ. Conversion also occurs through Holy Baptism, which is Gospel, as is the case with infants. But for the unbelieving adult, the spoken Word will be the means by which the Holy Spirit penetrates the stony heart. Through the Gospel, sinners who are blind, dead, and enemies of God are given sight, made alive, and turned to love God. This happens by the Holy Spirit acting upon people, for unbelievers cannot understand and cannot help themselves. It says in the Small Catechism's explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith . . ."

This reminds us that you can't reason someone into the kingdom of grace. It didn't happen for us that way. Why would we then try to argue our unbelieving friends into a confession of true faith?

So the answer to reaching your unbelieving, undiscerning friends is God's Word. Speak God's Law and Gospel to them. The Holy Spirit works through the Spirit-filled Word. Bring God's Word to bear on their lives, and the Holy Spirit will act upon them. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Faith does not come from reason, from the best argument, or from the most knowledge. You don't have to win anyone with your skills. In fact, you can't.

Let me offer two other important points. First, the Holy Spirit can be resisted (Acts 7:51). Therefore, we are never to judge our confession of the truth by "results." Second, the Word of God does not return empty (Isaiah 55:11). Therefore, as God gives you the opportunity, continue to speak the Word to your unbelieving friends and bring them to the public proclamation in the Church. There may come a time later in their lives when God brings to mind that Word you spoke.

Finally, rejoice in the Gospel of your own forgiveness as you receive absolution and are reminded of your baptism, hear the Word of Christ preached and partake of His body and blood in the divine service. Then by the Holy Spirit you continue to receive for certain the complete forgiveness from the Father for the sake of Christ, which you then declare to others.