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Before the Face of God

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Before the Face of God

*A Study of the
Heidelberg Catechism
Lord's Day 1-24*

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Lord's Day I

Illustration

On the last day of May, 1567, in the city of Valenciennes,* two gallows were erected in the middle of the city square. On one hung the body of a man; below the other stood a second, still very much alive, but with a noose already tied around his neck.

The condemned addressed the audience, gathered on the square, anxiously awaiting his last words. Surrounding the square was an armed militia, ready at any moment to restore order. The doomed man's speech began, "Obey . . . pay respect to those placed in authority over you . . ." He raised his arms, as if in benediction, speaking of the true gospel which he had proclaimed, exhorting the people to persevere in the teachings of that gospel.

The executioner stepped forward, abruptly pulling the ladder out from under the condemned man's feet. The body dropped. The head snapped. The lifeless body swung back and forth, back and forth. The Inquisition had killed yet another victim.

An angry ripple billowed through the crowd. Women screamed. Men surged forward—faces hard, fists clenched. The soldiers reacted instantly and opened fire into the crowd. Dead and wounded fell at random. People turned, running in all directions. It was a bloody ending to what seemed like an auspicious beginning.

Yes, the beginning had been very favorable. Pastor Guido de Brès of Antwerp, friend and student of John Calvin, had, a year before, accepted the call to Valenciennes, whose population had long hungered for the Word of God. His arrival had been accompanied by cheering crowds, and together with his friend de la Grange, he had ministered far and wide for the Lord. Indeed, it was said of this community that they had an intense desire for the Word of God.

Then came the Iconoclasts.* In Valenciennes too, some churches were ransacked. De Brès did not agree with the Iconoclasts, although from then on, preaching did take the line of the Protestant Reformation.

Reprisals were not long in coming. The governor of Hainault laid siege to the city which counted in vain on the Prince of Orange for support. Following prolonged artillery attacks, the city surrendered in

March of 1567. The Reformed preachers, de la Grange and de Brès, in an attempt to escape certain death, lowered themselves by ropes down the city walls that night. However, nearby villagers recognized the two men and alerted the authorities. Their arrests followed.

From the Valenciennes prison, de Brès wrote his wife: "I am detained in the most inaccessible and most unbearable dungeon imaginable. It is so somber and dark that people call it 'The Black Hole.' Fresh air comes only through a small, putrid opening used to discard sewage. The irons locked to my hands and feet are thick and heavy—an unrelenting hell since they strip my poor bones of all their flesh."

Yet he glorified God, faithful even now, and in a subsequent letter to his mother, wrote about *the only comfort in life and death*. He spoke of Jesus Christ's continual presence: "He's here in prison with me. I can see Him, so to speak, shut up and manacled in these selfsame irons and chains. In my mind's eye I can see Him imprisoned in this miserable, dark dungeon since He has promised me, through His word of truth, to be with me all the days until the end of the world. He said that if any of the least of His disciples is in prison, it is really He: 'I was in prison and you have visited me.'"

On the day he was to die, de Brès said to his fellow prisoners, "It appears to me that my soul has wings to ascend into heaven, for I have been invited to the wedding feast of my Lord, the Son of God."

During these troubled times, the Catechism was born. A time of suffering for the Dutch martyrs; a time when they were burned at the stake for their faith; a time when cities were decimated; a time of torture and unspeakable cruelty to those who kept the faith.

What a blessing for those persecuted to have had within their reach that small booklet speaking of comfort in life and death! Children memorized the words. Old people fed on this food for their soul. Thus, the Catechism became the Church's guideline for teaching and comfort.

Continued Comfort It was not only the people during these bleak years of the sixteenth century who needed comfort. Throughout all time, the church and its members, old and young, have need of such comfort.

What about our time? The Bible says that we live "in the last days"—days in which the Holy Spirit has been poured out (Acts 2:17). And we know that the Spirit goes by the beautiful name of *Comforter*. We, therefore, live in an age of continuous comfort.

But why do we need comfort? Surely we don't live in times of relentless oppression! There are fun things to do, games to play, books to read, vacations to enjoy. Do we have any reason to complain?

While this is true for most of us, there are many who are forced to do without—just check the hospitals, the refugee camps in South Africa or Southeast Asia. Their plight should always trouble us, especially when we live such sheltered lives.

But what about your own life? Consider, for example a man who lives in a mansion and has money galore. Where does he go in the long run? Where do we all go?

This is worth thinking about, not just once, but for the rest of our lives. For you will realize that we are all en route to our God. As II Corinthians 5:10 puts it: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (NIV).

The Catechism's purpose is to show us how we must travel to God. Without the comfort the Catechism teaches, we would never make it. We are sinners, after all, who are often unwilling to do what God wants. And if our sins are not taken away, He will send us away. Once sent away, not even the best of us are worth anything, and we will be eternally lost.

We, therefore, need the comfort of the Holy Spirit. What, then, does the Holy Spirit say to us?

I Belong to Jesus Christ The Catechism is very personal. It does not speak of others, or about people in general, but in direct terms of "I" and "me." That is to say, it focusses directly and specifically on the "I," whether that "I" is an adult, teenager or child.

The Catechism addresses *my* life and asks where I am headed. To believe the Word of God is decisive, leading to a life of glory. Such is the Spirit's message through the Word, for through that Word the Spirit witnesses of Jesus who long ago died on

the cross at the age of thirty-three. Yet through that same Word the Spirit reminds us that this same Jesus is still among us, caring for all our needs, body and soul.

Jesus has bought us and paid for us with His blood. We were all once enemies of God and belonged to the devil. Yet after Christ's purchase, believers are reconciled to God, and freed from their slavery to satan.

From that moment on, Jesus cares for them, prays for them and will not allow any of His sheep to be lost again.

Meaning for This Life For our lives here on earth such comfort means that not a hair of my head will be lost without the will of the heavenly Father. Look at Peter in prison. Humanly speaking, it was impossible for him to escape. Yet he walked out because of God's will. And Peter's God is our God. When we are sick, we must call the doctor *and* ask God to bless the doctor's efforts. When preparing for exams, we must study *and* ask God to give us a clear mind and steady nerves. God rules everything and we know "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28 NIV).

Meaning for Eternal Life Because Jesus cares for us, we need not fear death. Those who really believe, are not afraid because the Holy Spirit brings peace to their hearts. You shouldn't ask: "Would I be ready to die today?" because God asks you to live. But you should be able to answer the question, "Do I love the Lord Jesus?" If so, He will prepare your soul so that you will be able to die in peace when that time comes. It is a fact that many believers, during times of persecution and hardship, have died while singing hymns. Such songs are a gift of grace, granted when most needed.

Three Parts Read question 2 and remember that faith is not made up of three separate parts. There is no such thing as a partial faith; believing in Jesus is a matter of the entire heart. Think of all the sick, the lepers and the blind, who came to Jesus for help. They didn't ask for a bit of this and a bit of that, but for the total help they needed—the total help they knew He could give.

We always have to be aware of the fact that we need Jesus. In other words, we have to know that we are sinful, and that being sinful has consequences. That's the first part.

If we constantly take this sin to Jesus and ask Him for help, He *will help*. That's the second part.

Once Jesus has helped us, we should not be able to stop *praising* Him for that. Our lives should always reflect Christ's love. That's the third part.

Remember, though, that all three parts belong together. This can be compared to a tree which consists of roots, a trunk and leaves. The plant is not complete with any of these parts missing. The entire Catechism continues to speak about these three parts of faith; but in treating any one of these, keep in mind that they belong together *as a whole* made up of three parts.

For Adults

The Catechism is a *confessional document*—one of a number of confessional documents that the church has adopted throughout the centuries to address the following needs:

- (a) a brief, concise summary of what the church believes;
- (b) a refutation of all heresy;
- (c) a teaching handbook for children and young people.

But is the Bible not sufficient? Certainly! The Bible has everything we need to know. The need for confessional writings can perhaps be best explained through an analogy. The Bible is much like a huge country through which we travel. It is so large, in fact, that it is useful to have a map that shows direction to the most important places.

Many faulty maps have also been made of the Bible. Each false teaching has its preaching. Confessional writings warn of these dangerous teachings. The Catechism, then, has no other purpose than to mirror the main points of Holy Scripture.

A confession, therefore, has church authority since it articulates the church's faith. However, a confession has no divine authority; it can, therefore, be changed should it appear that its teachings are erroneous or unclear.

The church has three general confessions: the Apostolic Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. In addition, churches of the Reformation have the three Forms of Unity: the Belgic Confession (37 articles composed by Guido de Brès in 1561); the Heidelberg Catechism (composed by Zachariah Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus in 1563); the Canons of Dort (composed by the Synod of

Dordrecht in 1618-19).

There are other churches that have adopted the three Forms of Unity. However, many churches no longer maintain or observe them. It is to be deplored when a minister no longer preaches the truth and comfort of God's Word. Those churches, however, that do seriously observe the content of their confessions should always be encouraged to seek greater cooperation with each other and, in some instances, should seek reunification.

On the Textbook

1. Who was Guido de Brès? What, according to your lesson, was the source of his strength when he was in prison?
2. What does comfort mean? Does it have anything to do with a fort? Is it the same as comfortable?
3. Why is the Holy Spirit called the Comforter?
4. Why do we need comfort? Does II Corinthians 5:10 help you understand why you need comfort?
5. "The same Jesus is still among us." What does that mean? Why is that a great comfort?
6. Summarize the three parts in your own words. Why is it important to understand that the three parts may not be separated?

On the Bible

1. Read Isaiah 40:1, 2. Now read the verses 27-31. What does this chapter tell us about comfort? Why does God give comfort to His people?
2. Read Romans 8:28-39. Summarize in your own words what Paul says here about our comfort. Can you understand why Christians in time of persecution turned to this passage for their comfort?
3. In Psalm 23 David talks about the Lord as a Shepherd who cares, and as a Host who prepares food for His people. Does that help you understand why this Psalm is favored by many people?
4. The three parts of the Catechism are patterned after Paul's letter to the Romans. With your parents' help, can you find what part of Romans deals with our sin, what part deals with our deliverance, and what part deals with our thankfulness?

For Discussion

1. There are many churches that say: "No Creed, but Christ." Why are creeds necessary? What is their function?
2. The Catechism often uses the first person pronoun. Why does it do that? Is it important that you are able to say in your own words what the church believes?

Lord's Day II

Illustration:
II Chronicles
34:14-33

Why is the law read in our church each Sunday morning? It is read so that we might know the way in which the Lord wishes us to walk. It's so easy to forget that way. Just think of the story of Josiah, the last good Judean king before the exile. He was only eight years old when he was given the heavy responsibility of ruling the nation. How hard it must have been to govern a nation made up of so many different tribes; a small nation wedged in among so many more powerful. King Josiah was going to need all the wisdom he could get.

Wisdom, however, does not depend on age. Wisdom depends on faith. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). Young Josiah turned out to be wiser than either his father or grandfather. Purging all idolatry from the country, he even destroyed all the altars and images in the nation of the Ten Tribes.

During the eighteenth year of his reign, he began to restore the temple. He poured all his energy and love into something which had been neglected for years—priority for the way God intended His people to live. Suddenly a remarkable discovery was made! The long lost *book of the Law of Moses* was found by the high priest Hilkiah.

How could this sacred book of the Law have been lost in the first place? Hadn't God Himself commanded that the Law be read at the celebration of every annual festival? Manasseh's more than half a century, wicked reign, plus Amon's two evil years, were more than enough to have wiped the Law from minds and hearts. People forget quickly!

Hilkiah gave the Law book to Shaphan, the king's secretary. When Shaphan read from it to the king, the first reading of the Law in decades, Josiah tore his clothes. It was the custom for people to tear their clothes when they felt deep sorrow and penitence. You see, the reading of the Law had shown the king how they had fallen miserably short in keeping God's will. Josiah realized that, although he had dedicated his entire life to the service of God, it had not been enough. For the first time he learned of the Lord's grave judgments against anyone who was not faithful to the ordinances of

the book of the Law.

This sudden realization grieved king Josiah deeply. Immediately he sent a message to the prophetess Huldah. She was a woman, living in Jerusalem, to whom God made known His will. From Huldah Josiah learned that all the curses written in the book of the Law would come true for those who did not keep the Law. God is a holy God. He will not allow scoffing or permit His holy Law to be neglected.

One thing turned out in Josiah's favor though. Since he had humbled himself before God he would not experience the disaster which God would visit upon the people. Josiah would be buried in peace.

How Do
You Know
Your Misery?

This historical account shows us very clearly that we can know our misery only out of the Law of God. God's chosen people simply "lived." They even thought that they had a good relationship with God and were doing all that God required of them.

But they were terribly wrong. God doesn't ask for just some segment of your life—He asks for everything. He lays His claim on all of life, on every aspect of man's thinking and doing, on Sunday and Monday, on young people and old, on kings and beggars alike.

God's claim on the whole of life was made in the plural Law He gave to Israel. That Law included, first of all, the civil Law, which said that all the nation's affairs were to be dedicated to God; secondly, the ceremonial Law, which said that religious life belonged to God; and thirdly, the moral Law, which said that spiritual and moral life was also included in God's claim.

The people of Israel refused to obey this in its entirety. Many things, they believed, could be done without God.

Now this was misery!—living without God. Actually it can be said to be alienated, away from God's land. This alienation can be traced back to man's fall into sin and the eviction of Adam and Eve from Paradise.

God's Law tells us how we are to live in communion with Him and that life without God is subject to His judgment.

The Ultimate Depth of the Law The Old Testament has passed into history. Israel's civil law is no longer binding, for there is no longer such a thing as a separate holy people and a holy land. Israel's ceremonial law was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and became obsolete when the curtain in front of the Holy of Holies was torn in two.

Does this mean that the Law no longer applies to us today? Every Sunday the Ten Commandments are read to us, the same Ten Commandments that were inscribed on the two stone tablets, symbolizing their permanent character. They still apply and Jesus summed them up in the dual commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The eternal, ultimate basis of the Law is *love*.

Some people think that this makes the fulfillment of the Law much easier. Who, after all, could have fulfilled all the complicated regulations of the Mosaic law? Love, they say, is something else. It's something we can all do! But how wrong they are, for it is that simple act of loving which is impossible for us!

Inclined to Hatred The Catechism uses a very harsh word. It states, "I am prone by nature to *hate* God."

Hate? What about all the good, humanistic deeds which even atheists seem capable of? Despite the way things look, however, hatred, or self-love, is deeply rooted within all of us. The most revealing evidence of this hatred was shown at the cross. Throughout His life, Jesus had done only good. Yet He was crucified and no one came to His defense. Some people hated Him intensely; others simply followed the crowd. Some people abandoned Him out of fear; others tormented Him out of cruelty. They were all people—different interests, background or race—but they were all people. Yet not one of them could muster up enough courage to love Him to the end. So much for man!

Now God does restrain our inclination to hatred; otherwise, life would be a hell on earth and there would not be a place for His church. In His common grace, He has established governments; He has allowed families, natural bonds of affection and care; He has given friendships and other social

relationships. But when His restraint is broken, hatred erupts. We see revolution, tyranny, decadence, divorce, fierce competition, exploitation, war, murder and death.

Misery, thy name is forsaking God's Law. There is really only one solution. That solution is Jesus Christ, who has totally fulfilled the Law. He wants to give His people a new heart—a heart which will be able to love again. But that gift can be received only through His grace.

For Adults A law is a rule to live by, given by a higher authority. In Paradise, Adam and Eve knew the Law of God, not because it had been publicly proclaimed to them, but because they had been created in the image of God (in true holiness): the same way that they needed food and drink, so they needed to love.

Because sin destroyed the image of God in them, they needed to be given the Law. At the same time, their hearts had to be renewed according to the image of God (regeneration).

Jesus came as the "second Adam," once again bearing the Law of God in His heart (Ps. 40:9; Heb. 10:7). He showed that the ultimate purpose of the Law is to love God and your neighbor. He Himself fulfilled this Law to the end (John 13:1), and taught it to His disciples through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

The three things the Law teaches us are:

- (a) our sins;
- (b) our need to flee to Christ (Gal. 3:23-25);
- (c) our requirement to live a life of gratitude and praise.

On the Textbook

1. Who was Josiah? What evidence do you find in the Bible that he was a wise king?
2. How could "the book of the law" get lost? Can that happen today? If so, how? in what sense?
3. How did the law teach a knowledge of sin and misery to Josiah and the people?
4. God lays claim "on the whole of life." What does that include? Do you think of that every day? How did the various laws God gave to Israel underscore that?
5. What is *misery*?
6. Some people think that it is easy to *love*. Why is that not true?

7. Hate. It is a hard word. Are all people—you too—guilty of hate? Why was Jesus crucified?

who speaks, in the other it is Christ. What's the difference?

4. What, according to Galatians 3:23-25, is the task of the law?

On the Bible

1. In Romans 7:7-12 Paul talks about the law. State in your own words the point Paul is making. Is the law good or bad?
2. Read Psalm 130. What is the Psalmist's problem? What is his comfort? How will the Lord redeem His people?
3. Psalm 40:6-8 and Hebrews 10:5-7 say pretty well the same thing. But in the one case it is David

For Discussion

1. Many people talk about misery—hunger, war, drought—but very few people talk about sin. Why is that?
2. If the law is the teacher of sin, do people who don't want to accept God's law know about sin? Do they really know who they are?

Lord's Day III

Illustration

It was a breathtakingly beautiful day in Paradise . . . flowers blossomed, birds sang, peace abounded. In the middle of this idyllic setting Adam and Eve were standing next to a tree. They knew the tree well. It was the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; the tree God had spoken to them about specifically.

To eat of the fruit of this tree was deadly. Actually, it was an evil tree. The entire creation was good, but through this particular tree, God had permitted the devil a place to entice man. God had, however, emphatically warned man about the evil of this tree: "But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17 NIV).

Listen! Eve was intrigued by a small, tempting voice: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" Eve turned. She recognized the serpent. It was logical that she knew him. Together with Adam, she had classified and named all the animals according to their kind. She was very well aware of the fact that she was listening to the most subtle of all animals created by God.

Eve was not surprised that the serpent could speak. The whole world around her was miraculous. She did sense though, that in some way this beautiful creation was in peril and it would be up to her and her husband not only to discover and develop it, but also to preserve it. It was especially here, near this tree, that she had to be on guard.

In her response to the serpent, she told the truth: "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die'" (Gen. 3:2, 3 NIV). The serpent responded with an outrageous assertion. He implied that God was a liar: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4 NIV).

Now this was the assault, albeit very subtle, that God had warned against. But it originated from something much bigger than the serpent. For the serpent, being one of God's creatures, was also good. No, there was another power, using the form

of a serpent.

Even if Eve had never before met this power, she should have recoiled in terror, for the message insinuated by the serpent was terrible. It was blasphemous, urging Adam and Eve to revolt against God—to usurp His place—to become like Him.

Eve did not run. She became curious. She let her imagination run away with her. Suppose the serpent was right.

Herein lies the birth of sin because to doubt the reliability of God's Word is always the first step in sinning!

Eve stared at the enchanting tree. In the same way that she knew everything about the animals, she also had knowledge of the trees in the garden. She saw that the fruit of the tree was very desirable. What could it hurt? Hesitantly, she reached. Then she took some and ate, calling Adam as she did so, inviting him to do the same. And Adam, a man personally instructed by God, allowed himself to be led astray.

So they both ate, and simultaneously came to a terrible discovery. Their eyes were opened and they saw that instead of being like God, as the serpent had promised, they had lost God altogether. The peace in their hearts was gone—forever. They had broken the covenant with God.

They stood aghast at this realization, staring at each other, sensing their nakedness, exposed to all the perils of life. They sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. They were suddenly afraid of God.

That, was the beginning of sin in this world.

God's Good Creation

Where did sin come from? Certainly not from God's good creation: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen. 1:31 NIV).

Sin did not come from man's body, for it was also good, pure and undefiled. Nor did man sin because his mental capacity was not developed enough, or because his will had not been adequate

trained, or because his feelings were too immature. After all, all these aspects of man had been created in God's image (Gen. 1:27).

But what did it mean to be created in God's image? It meant that man resembled God as a child might resemble his father. But this was limited to a degree, for the creature can never be the same as the Creator. Yet man's spirit reflected God's glory and that was why man was given dominion over all things.

From the New Testament we learn that this image of God can best be seen and known in three characteristics or "virtues": knowledge, righteousness and holiness (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24).

Knowledge: not knowledge as we understand being learned. Adam was not an educated man, yet he knew God and knew how all things in creation stood in accordance with their relationship to God.

Righteousness: Adam's relationship with God was in order. He did not have to bring a sacrifice in order to reconcile himself to God. He was allowed to speak to God freely, as to a friend. When we pray, we do so in Jesus' name, asking our prayers to be answered for Jesus' sake. Adam did not have to do this.

Holiness: God's Law, the Law of love, had been engraved on Adam's heart. His life and work would be dedicated to the glory of God and the good of his neighbor. This was also true for Eve. Both had been created in God's image.

Then where did sin come from?

The Covenant of Works To find an answer to this question, we have to realize something: in Paradise, Adam was God's *covenant partner*. This term cannot be found in the first few chapters of the Bible, but in Hosea 6:7 we find, "Like Adam, they have broken the covenant."

Later God also made a covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8 and 9), then with Abraham (Gen. 15:8; 17:2), and finally with Israel (Ex. 24:7 and 8).

We do not know whether God solemnized the covenant with Adam, but we do know that a covenant between God and man existed in Paradise.

What is a covenant? It is an agreement between friends in which each party promises to do something for the other. God would care for Adam and give him eternal life if Adam remained true to the covenant (the tree of life).

Adam's part was to serve the Lord and obey Him in all areas of creation. "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over

every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28).

Adam was also required to preserve, or protect the Garden of Eden. This task implied the existence of an evil power which threatened God's creation. As faithful covenant ally, Adam had to guard against this power, symbolized in the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

What a wonderful calling for Adam and Eve to be covenant partners of the living God!

Adam's Freedom

Adam was also able to *refuse* this calling. God had created him good, but He had not created him as a puppet. Adam was free to do whatever he wished, and could, therefore, refuse to do something. God did not desire a compelled obedience, but rather a voluntary obedience. Thus Adam's freedom was real. God only wanted the allegiance of a being who would choose for Him out of free will. Hence Adam could *choose* between good and evil. If he chose to do good, God would establish his happiness forever. He would then be allowed to eat from the tree of life which symbolized the beginning of eternal communion with God.

The Wrong Choice

This says it all. There is no explanation for the fact that Adam, though created perfect, could make such an evil choice. We can only say that the guilt was his, and cannot be attributed to God.

We share in Adam's guilt, for we cannot set ourselves apart from Adam and Eve.

Original Sin

We belong to Adam and Eve. Instead of speaking of "original sin," it might be better to speak of "human sin," for the first sin was committed by man. Modern Bible translations read "man" where the King James Version had the name "Adam" (Gen. 2:19-25; Gen. 3:8-12, 17, 21; Gen. 4:1). Adam *was* "man." He was the first of mankind, followed by Eve and subsequently the rest of the human race. When we think of the covenant between Adam and God, we see Adam as the *head* of that covenant. By this we mean that the covenant was intended not only for him but for every human being thereafter. Hence Adam's sin was original and hereditary.

God sees us as He saw Adam and thus holds us

accountable for the sin committed by Adam. We also share in the sinful nature taken on by Adam and Eve after the fall.

Evil From birth all people “are
Consequences wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil.”

Isn't that a little extreme? So much good still happens in the world! Even unbelievers are capable of selfless acts and neighborly love.

However, there are different kinds of goodness: that which man calls good and that which God calls good. True goodness is to live in the way God once expected Adam to live in the covenant of works.

However, this is no longer possible. Only the Lord Jesus, as the second Adam, could fulfill the terms of the covenant of works. Man is still capable of doing some good; for example, he can be a good citizen or help others. But he is no longer capable of doing what is spiritually good. That is, being a faithful covenant partner to God. It is only through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that Christians can once again begin to learn about some of that spiritual goodness. However, they must first receive a new heart from Him through regeneration.

For Adults At the root of human sin lies sin in the realm of angels. God created angels when He created the heavens, and they were joyful witnesses at the creation of the earth (Job 38:7).

Angels were also created with free will, enabling them to choose for or against God. Some of the angels “who did not keep their positions of authority” (Jude 6), were led astray by one single, mighty angel, who had become conceited (I Tim. 3:6). How sin could spring up in the hearts of angels is an even greater mystery than the origin of sin in the human heart. We know only that this apostate angel became an extremely powerful foe.

The division between good and evil is a permanent one. Some Christians believe that eventually the devil and his hosts will be either destroyed or converted. But this idea is not biblical. The Bible may say that “God will be all in all” (I Cor. 15:28); however, “all” here does not encompass all creatures but only the redeemed. Elsewhere the apostle Paul says of those people who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that “they will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the ma-

gesty of his power” (II Thess. 1:9). In Revelation we read that the devil will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where also the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. “They will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10).

This language drives home the intense gravity of sin, both in its origin and in its completion. There will be bitter resistance to God until the very end. God's wrath will also remain to the very end. There is really only one way to redemption; a way that must be preached to all nations: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” The origin of sin, which remains hidden from our understanding now, will one day be disclosed fully by God Himself.

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that the image of God consists of true righteousness and holiness. Others add knowledge to this definition, an addition supported by Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10, which tell us that the new, regenerated man has been given these gifts by the Holy Spirit.

However, there is more. The image of God encompasses all of man. “He is the image and the glory of God” (I Cor. 11:7). We also see the image of God reflected in man's kingly role; in his independence (even though he always remains dependent on God); and in his physical stature (the eyes are the mirror of the soul).

In this definition of the image of God, we differ with the Roman Catholics and the followers of Karl Barth.

Roman Catholics teach that the image of God does not belong to the essence of man, but is an added gift of God—a golden rein—which enables him to suppress the inclinations of the flesh. Through man's fall into sin and his loss of the image of God, he lost the golden rein, but his ordinary human nature remained intact.

Others teach something similar: the image of God is not part of original human nature, but after creation God transferred man into His image by transposing him into a realm of light. By sinning, man lost that realm, but that did not change his human nature.

Karl Barth agreed with this. He denied that man is the image of God, and was willing to admit only that man carries the image of God as a special gift, not as part of his human essence.

Such theories are not biblical. The Bible teaches us that man was created in the image of God. Thus it also teaches that the destruction caused by sin affected man's entire existence and corrupted all of human nature.

It is true, of course, that after his fall into sin, man still remained man. He did not become an animal. The Bible still calls fallen man the image of

God (Gen. 9:6).

People of Reformed tradition usually distinguish between the image of God in a narrow and a broader sense. According to this distinction, sin caused man to lose the image in the narrower sense; that is, the virtues of righteousness, holiness and knowledge, while the image of God in the broader sense, that is, intelligence, will and immortality, were retained. It is a little easier to understand in the Belgic Confession which says that man retains only "small remains" of the original gifts of creation (Article 14) and the Canons of Dort, which say that man retains "the glimmerings of natural light" (III and IV, 4). Sin is no less than the destruction of the *entire* man, yet through His common grace God preserves enough of the gifts of creation so that man can still be seen and addressed *as man*.

On the Textbook

1. Why was the tree of "the knowledge of good and evil" a dangerous tree?
2. Did Eve know there was danger in the garden? Why did she not turn away from the serpent?
3. The serpent was a good creation of God. What explains his evil works? What is his evil?
4. When Adam and Eve sinned they "broke the covenant" and they "lost their protection." Explain.
5. In what way did Adam and Eve "look like God"? Can you explain what image-bearing means?
6. The Covenant of Works—what is a covenant?

What evidence is there in the Bible that the relationship between God and Adam was a covenantal relationship?

7. Whose fault is it that man sinned? Why is Adam's sin also your sin?
8. Why can no man do the good that God asks? Why is it so hard for people to accept that? Who alone can change that?

On the Bible

1. Read Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24. How do these passages help us understand what the Bible means by "the image of God"?
2. Genesis 3:1-13 tells the story of the fall into sin. Retell the story, paying special attention to the question of blame. Whose fault is it?
3. Read Romans 5:12-14. Where did sin come from? What is its power?
4. Look up Genesis 9:8, 9; Genesis 15:18 and 17:2; Exodus 24:7, 8. What do these passages teach us about God's relationship with His creatures?

For Discussion

1. What is the role of the devil in the fall of man? (See Jude 6, I Timothy 3:6.)
2. What is the place of angels in God's creation? (See Psalm 103:20; Hebrews 1:14; Job 38:7.)

Lord's Day IV

Illustration

A rather strange man is seen daily walking about in the temple court. It is not his sacrifices which attract attention, for he does not offer any. Nor is it his dialogue with the priests, for he does not address them.

The time is during the early years of the reign of Zedekiah, Judah's last king. Part of the nation has been exiled to Babylon already, and king Zedekiah reigns only by the grace of Nebuchadnezzar to whom he has sworn an oath of allegiance. At this time, however, Zedekiah is seriously thinking about breaking this oath. He is waiting for an opportune moment to lead a rebellion. He refuses to accept the fact that the Babylonian rule is God's judgment on continued idolatry.

Jeremiah, the man wandering about in the temple court, has warned Zedekiah and his people against fomenting such a rebellion. But they refuse to listen to the prophet, deluding themselves into thinking that God will not abandon them in their time of need.

Because the people refuse to listen to God's Word, Jeremiah now paces the temple court. He bears the words that no one wishes to hear, on his shoulders for all to see. It is a wooden yoke.

This yoke visibly proclaims to the people God's Word, spoken earlier by Jeremiah. "If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague . . . until I destroy it by his hand . . . but if any nation will bow its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let that nation remain in its own land to till it and to live there . . ." (Jer. 27:8 and 11 NIV).

Suddenly another prophet enters the temple. It is Hananiah, from Gibeon, and he declares to the people in Jeremiah's presence: "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon' " (Jer. 28:2 NIV). He adds that within two years the exiles will be free and the former king Jehoiachin will be restored to his place of honor.

Full of expectation, all eyes are now on Jeremiah who responds with a simple, "Amen! May the Lord

do so!" Then he continues. He says that Hananiah's words must be proven by the outcome. "But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true" (Jer. 28:9 NIV). The words hang in the air pointing accusingly at Hananiah. They say, "You are a false prophet." Hananiah dramatically retaliates by taking the yoke off Jeremiah's neck and breaking it. He then addresses the onlookers. "In the same way will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, off the neck of all the nations within two years." Jeremiah leaves.

But he reappears in the temple later wearing an iron yoke. God has instructed him in a second prophetic simile. He speaks again, touching his shoulders, emphasizing that just as this iron yoke cannot be broken, so the yoke of the king of Babylon will be unbreakable. He concludes by saying that the false prophet Hananiah will die within a year. People may draw their own conclusions.

Jeremiah's prophecy is fulfilled. In the seventh month of that same year Hananiah dies. But even then the nation does not listen. The people cannot believe that God is serious, nor can they accept the righteous punishment of the Almighty God . . . until they too are exiled to Babylon . . . until they see the princes of Judah killed before King Zedekiah's eyes.

The Unbelievable

God's righteous judgment can be a difficult thing for people to accept. Not always believing God's revelation of Himself in the Bible, people have, throughout the ages, tended to create their own picture of Him—refusing to bow before His majesty.

Invariably people overestimate themselves. They think they're not so bad after all and convince themselves that their intentions are really quite good.

For centuries Israel had played this game with God until He finally said, "This is the last straw." Israel wouldn't believe this. They were the chosen people!

Yet they had chosen to listen to false prophets rather than to the true Word of God. However, in the end, God's Word came to pass. Unfortunately, the Jewish people did not realize this until it was too late.

Excuse No. 1 What is it that makes people reject God's judgment? In the first place, they say that it is not fair of God to ask for the impossible. How can you ask a poor cripple to walk? How can God expect us, weak and short-sighted people that we are, to do what not even Adam could do?

God's Word replies that man's miserable condition cannot be blamed on God; neither will God accommodate Himself to people. He has created the world, including mankind, for His glory. With creation He has given the possibility that all things work together for good. Now He only insists, as is His right, that man complies. The rights of men are always negotiable. After all, they haven't really earned any rights. But if God were to surrender only a small fraction of His right, right and righteousness would no longer exist. God has laid His claim upon this world. It is His will for it to be good. This is a blessing!—otherwise, there would be nothing but misery here!

Excuse No. 2 If God has the right to call a disobedient world back to order through punishment, does He not also have the freedom *not* to punish? He is free, after all, and can do what He wants to do.

This excuse is an empty one though. We can speculate on what God might have done, but this does not help us at all if we know from His Word what He will do. It is not very helpful for a boy who finds himself in trouble to think: "My father won't punish me if he doesn't want to." After all, if both had previously agreed that some things would not go unpunished, the son will do well to assume that he *is* going to be punished.

God has made Himself very clear with regard to punishment for sin. He calls it a curse, and has revealed eternal damnation. We should know that God will do what He says, for although He is completely free, He is also known to be true to His Word.

Excuse No. 3 If God can be expected to inflict the punishment He has warned us about, how can this be harmonized with the fact that He is a merciful God? After all, eternal punishment is not a small matter. It could possibly be compared to a father who beats his child to death because that child has done something wrong.

But this comparison is not valid. God's relationship to us cannot be compared to that of a father to a delinquent child. Rather, the relationship is that between the King of kings and His subjects. We often make the mistake of visualizing God as "super" man. But in Isaiah 6 we read an awesome account of God revealing Himself to people, and of how great and terrible He really is.

Admittedly, He is also a father! This is a great miracle, revealed to us through the work of Jesus Christ. But that miracle itself is humanly impossible, since it had to be established through the death of Jesus. Without Jesus, God is not the father of all human beings. That is something all people must realize, otherwise they will make a terrible mistake.

Because God is God, there is eternal punishment—and there is only one way to avoid that punishment. If we choose to go that way, we can fully understand how merciful God is.

For Adults The teaching of eternal punishment is a *hard doctrine*. It is a doctrine peculiar to Reformed churches, but it is a teaching that reflects the uncompromising honesty of God's Word. Many theologians have tried to mitigate and even conceal this teaching. In the process, they have distorted God's Word. Some people advocate a *conditional immortality* which holds that only believers are immortal and all unbelievers will be destroyed.

Others advocate the *renewed restoration of all things* which holds that all people and all angels will one day be renewed and regenerated.

However, Jesus Himself has rejected theories such as these. He speaks of all the nations being gathered before Him and how He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" (Matt. 25:41 NIV). Realizing the truth of this message should make our proclamation of the gospel even more earnest and compelling. "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men . . . we implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God" (II Cor. 5:11 and 20 NIV).

On the Textbook

1. Why did Jeremiah wear a yoke? What did that yoke say?
2. Did God want Judah to go into captivity? Why?
3. Who was Hananiah? How did he represent the thinking of the people? Why did he make a yoke?
4. Did Jeremiah know that Hananiah's "prophecy" would not come true?
5. What point of Lord's Day IV is underscored by this story?
6. Why is it so difficult for people to understand and accept the justice of the Lord?
7. How does the Lord answer man's first escape attempt?
8. May you *expect* your father *not* to punish you when you have done something wrong?
9. God is "the King of kings" and He is "Father." What's the difference?

On the Bible

1. Read Genesis 3:14-19. What punishment is given to the serpent? to the woman? to Adam?
2. The serpent (dragon) and the woman are mentioned again in Revelation 12:1-9. How does Revelation 12 help us to understand the redemptive-historical meaning of Genesis 3?
3. In Romans 5:15-17 Paul talks about the "one for all" teaching of the Bible. State in your own words what this passage says?
4. Read Isaiah 6:1-5. What was it that made Isaiah very afraid?

For Discussion

1. What does the Bible mean by justice? What does it have to do with the covenant?
2. Many people who want nothing to do with God talk a lot about justice. Do they—or can they—know what they are talking about?

Lord's Day V

Illustration

Heading the fifth Lord's Day we see the word "deliverance."

We are now dealing with a new topic; a wonder God Himself brought into this world; a miracle man could never achieve: the deliverance of man through God's grace!

Lord's Day V will tell us about the greatness of this gift—a gift man needs before he can be saved. This miracle of grace is portrayed clearly in the story of Luther.

A portrait of the young Martin Luther, depicting his monastic years reveals a man with hollow cheeks, a pale and drawn face. Yet if you see pictures of him in later years, you look at a man with strong features, healthy and robust. The difference is readily understood when we read of his early years. Luther tried to earn his own salvation by punishing his body. It was for this reason that he entered a monastery. Since early childhood he had been consumed by the question of how he could earn his salvation and appear righteous before God.

He had tried to achieve this by leading an exemplary life—by studying diligently, making friends and enjoying life to the full. Yet his anxieties kept returning. What could he do with his life in order to prepare himself for his eventual encounter with God?

This constant anxiety finally climaxed. As he was walking alone in a forest one day, he was overtaken by a severe thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning struck the ground near him and he was thrown down. He felt as if God's wrath was overpowering him and cried out in terror: "Help me, Saint Anna! I vow to become a monk!" Thus it was that the youthful, exuberant, yet introverted Martin Luther entered a monastery.

Once in a monastery he tried everything humanly possible to redeem himself from sin. He fasted, prayed, did penance, beat himself, often more than the monastic rules required. His fellow monks, knowing his zeal, peered through the keyhole of his cell door from time to time, to see whether he was still alive.

Yet he could not subdue the deep awareness of his own sin. He had read the word "*righteousness*" in the Bible. He knew that God was righteous and

that He wanted to be served by righteous people. Desperately Luther sought to become righteous by keeping the law of God. Yet despite all his attempts, he could not succeed. Even in Rome, the holy city, where he crept up the steps of St. Peter's on his hands and knees (people today still climb those stairs in a misguided attempt to earn salvation), he did not obtain the peace he so sorely needed for his soul. Nothing seemed to help him. He could not help himself, the saints did not give him peace and the angels he implored remained silent.

Rereading the epistle to the Romans, he came across the well-known words, "The righteous shall live by faith." Then all at once, through the grace of God, he understood. He suddenly realized that righteousness, as described here, was not something to be earned by man, but was something given freely by God through His grace to those who believed in Christ. Luther shouted in joy: "You, Jesus, are my righteousness, and I am Your sin."

Luther now became the evangelist of this new gospel—a gospel actually as old as the Bible itself. It was the gospel of deliverance, not accomplished by man, but by God, through the Son He sent to pay for our sins.

God's Righteousness

Luther's life shows us that no one can dismiss righteousness. Actually, we don't really pay that much attention to it. Too many people see God as an indulgent father who forgives everything saying, "Don't worry. I still love you."

This is a grave mistake. If a teacher gives out straight "A's" to all of his students, regardless of their work, he would be unfair. Neither does God give us undeserved "A's." In fact, our lives are so flawed that He has every right to fail us. Yet, in His great mercy, He gives us a chance to correct things—a chance to give someone else the work that we cannot do. Yes, God is willing to accept someone else's work on our behalf. But that work must be perfect.

One for All It was the same way in Paradise. One person represented the whole human race. Adam was the head of the covenant of works and, as such, he was the man whose decision would be binding for all mankind.

After Adam's failure, God wanted a new Adam who would perfect everything that had become diseased and corrupted. He opened the door to redemption. But who would be the redeemer?

Could It Be a Man? "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10 NIV). Thousands of people have tried to live holy lives. Of those thousands, not one has ever progressed any farther than Luther, who was forced to confess that he was not able to keep even the simplest requirement of God's law. Yet Luther's failure was not due to the fact that he possessed special flaws or had an excessively evil nature. He sensed that God rightly demanded that we love Him with our whole heart. He knew that despite his efforts, he lacked in love and had little childlike confidence in his heart. He knew that he could not genuinely love his fellow man. He was ashamed that his own desires kept rising to the surface, that he remained so preoccupied with himself that he could not give his undivided attention to God.

The following medieval verse, a trifle changed, says it well:

Throughout my life I've yearned
To keep God's law complete,
Yet nothing have I earned
But fear my Lo'd to meet.
I set my heart to try,
All things in life to test—
But all my sins deny
Me pleasure of God's rest.

Can It Be a Mere Creature? If man can be of no help, who can? In Old Testament times animals were sacrificed every day. Could animal blood really make adequate reconciliation with God? Hebrews 10:4 reads: "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (NIV). An animal does not even know what sin is. How then can it bear the sins of man?

What about the other creatures, the angels? On the cover of the ark in the tabernacle there were two angels. Were they there because they had assisted or made possible reconciliation between

God and man? We know that angels are always helpful: "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Heb 1:14 NIV). But they cannot help God to bring about reconciliation. How can an angel, who is not human and has no flesh and blood, complete the work that God requires man to do? And even if it were possible for an angel to become man, would his limited power be sufficient to take away damnation? Even though angels "long to find out about" things regarding salvation (I Peter 1:12 NIV), and surely rejoice in the conversion of a sinner, they cannot do what only God can do, that is, convert the heart of a sinner.

Who Alone Can Help Us? Another man can and may substitute for other men. But if he is to bear the eternal punishment and bring men to God, this man will have to have divine powers himself. Indeed, He will have to be God Himself.

Only God Himself can help us—a God who has chosen our side and has become like us. What glory and comfort it is to know that what is humanly impossible has become a miraculous reality. For when Jesus, God's only Son, was born, He became man. "The mystery of godliness is great. He appeared in a body . . ." (I Tim. 3:16 NIV).

For Adults Lord's Day 5 and 6 have often been called "scholastic." Scholastic thinking was popular in the Middle Ages. It is criticized because it can go beyond God's Word to a system of human reasoning and conclusions based on worldly views.

One such scholastic was Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). In his well-known book *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why did God become man?), scholastic reasoning is prevalent. It is often thought that Lord's Days 5 and 6 are based on Anselm's thinking.

The question that arises here is whether these two Lord's Days go beyond the Word of God or whether they are based only on the Word of God.

The answer is not difficult. As with all Lord's Days, these two are based on biblical texts. A careful reading will prove that Lord's Day 5 is a summary of God's Word. Admittedly, this summary follows a logical form of reasoning.

- (a) God's justice will be satisfied;
- (b) this satisfaction must be accomplished by ourselves or by another;
- (c) we cannot make this satisfaction ourselves;

- (d) no other mere creature can do this;
- (e) the deliverer, therefore, must be man, yet more powerful than man.

This logical reasoning, based on Scripture, is justified. The work of deliverance is clearly a miraculous work, something that cannot be done by man. It is, however, not an unreasonable work. Through His wisdom God has given us something that is humanly impossible, and we can only admire His wisdom.

Insight into this work of redemption will discourage us from making futile attempts to satisfy God's justice by ourselves or to seek our redemption anywhere else but in Jesus.

On the Textbook

1. What questions troubled Luther? Do such questions ever trouble you? Should they?
2. How did Luther try to answer the questions that troubled his soul? Was he successful? Explain.
3. What is the only answer to Luther's—and our—questions?
4. What is "the big mistake" people make again and again?
5. "One for all," how can that solve the problem of sin?
6. What is the point of the "medieval verse"?
7. Why can an animal not serve as a substitute for man?
8. Who answers our problems?

On the Bible

1. Read Romans 3:9-20. Now read Romans 5:1-5. How do these two passages underscore the point of this lesson?
2. The Old Testament—especially the books of Exodus and Leviticus—tells us that God asked for sin offerings, guilt offerings and trespass offerings. (See, e.g. Exodus 29 and Leviticus 16.) Hebrews 10:4, however, says: "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." What, then, was the purpose of all those animal sacrifices?
3. What did Job know that Luther did not? (Job 9:1, 2,15).
4. Hebrews 7:26-28 talks about "the perfect High Priest." Make a list of things wherein this High Priest differs from all others. What is the point of this passage?

For Discussion

1. Why is it so difficult for us to accept deliverance as a free gift? Why do hostages usually not have this problem?
2. Why is it that people talk so much about God's love but not about His justice when they talk about our salvation? (Note: They may quote John 3:16, not 3:18-21, and they ignore Isaiah 1:27.)

Lord's Day VI

Illustration: Two men walked down a deserted road. Deep voices penetrated the quiet dusk. Their mood seemed melancholy judging by the stooped shoulders and sad bearing. Words drifted about haltingly.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, another man joined them, and, without even introducing himself, asked, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" (Luke 24:17a NIV). They stood still, staring at the stranger dejectedly. One of them, whose name was Cleopas, asked, "Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" (Luke 24:18 NIV). He then proceeded to explain about the crucifixion of Jesus, a man mighty in word and deed, who had been expected by many to redeem Israel. It was clear from what Cleopas said that he and his friend had their own thoughts on what that redemption meant. As a matter of fact, they were so caught up in what they wanted to happen, that they dismissed as trivial the women's news that angels had told them Jesus lived.

You see, according to Cleopas and his friend, if Jesus had been the mediator, He should not have died. Instead, He should have been a strong, conquering hero liberating the people of Israel. That would have been the kind of mediator they would have understood. The idea of a soldier-king was so embedded in their thinking that the stranger's unexpected response seemed to point an accusing finger at them. "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:25, 26 NIV).

Cleopas and his friend could have saved themselves a lot of trouble. Instead of being confused and dismayed, they could have been jumping for joy! But they had foolishly insisted on their own view of what the mediator should be like.

How could they have known better? Well, they could have paid more attention to what the Word of God said. They could have known that only God could say what the mediator would be like and how He would establish true peace between Himself and the people.

The stranger now began to explain Scriptures to them. He showed them that the very first promise found in the Bible prophesied that the head of the serpent would be crushed, as would the heel of the promised child. He showed them that the promised child had to be from David's house, born in the city of Bethlehem—born like any other human child. He pointed out that this child would grow like a tender shoot, like a root out of dry ground, as the humblest of all mankind. Yet this child, the stranger continued, would be called the Son of God who would conquer death.

Cleopas and his friend listened intently. The words sounded like music to their ears and their hearts became glad. Subconsciously they thought, "If only we had studied the Scriptures ourselves."

They couldn't get enough of the stranger's words and invited Him into their home when they reached Emmaus. He let them persuade Him and came with them.

As they sat down around the table to share a simple meal of bread, He led them in prayer. Then He took the bread, broke it . . . and, as if scales had fallen off their eyes, they stared at Him—the Lord Jesus.

Just as suddenly as He came, He was gone. Having brought the glad tidings, there was no need for Him to stay any longer. Cleopas and his friend could now pass His message on to others. They returned to Jerusalem that very evening bursting with the great message. They now realized that it had been necessary for Christ to die, to fulfill the Scriptures.

The Son of God

The fact that the mediator who would come to redeem us would be truly man, was ordained by God. It is emphasized by Jesus as He calls Himself "the Son of man."

This was the same Son of man who was prophesied by Daniel (7:13) as the Messiah. The expression *Son of man* indicates, on the one hand, the glory which the Messiah of God would receive and, on the other, His genuine human nature, subject to

suffering and humiliation.

As man Jesus was our brother. He identified with us so closely that He even says, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:55 NIV).

He was our brother—He worked as we do. He learned a trade; was able to wield hammer and saw in Joseph's workshop; people called Him the carpenter.

He was our brother—He paid taxes as we do. When the taxes were due, Jesus paid His debt with a coin found in the mouth of a fish (Matt. 17:24-27).

He was our brother—He experienced joy as we do. He attended a wedding and provided the wine. When He shared meals with tax collectors and sinners, He was slandered, even labeled a glutton and a drunkard. He accepted the good gifts of God.

He was our brother—He was a pilgrim as we are. Thus He was moved to say, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20 NIV).

He was our brother—He felt sorrow as we do. He wept at the graveside of a friend. He suffered hunger and thirst. He was deeply moved by the fate of Jerusalem. He was the man of sorrows.

In all these attributes His human nature came through clearly.

Why was it so important for Christ, the Mediator, to be truly man? It was because our lives could only be redeemed by someone who shared in all things of this life. Imagine someone who seeks the release of a friend imprisoned in a concentration camp in Siberia. He travels to Siberia and reports to the camp commander saying, "I'd like you to let my friend go." The commander will most certainly reply, "Sure, but he has to serve his sentence first. He cannot be released until his term is up." Imagine if the man would then say to the commander, "But I want to take his place. In fact, I will even take his name. Then you won't have to change any of the papers. *I will become that man.*" This story seems utterly ridiculous!

But let's assume it happens. The friend is released and the substitute takes his place. He is subjected to corporal punishment and forced labor. He endures cold, misery, deprivation and the constant threat of death.

This was the incarnation of the Lord Jesus. The world itself is a huge concentration camp leading to death. The only possible way to escape this inevitable verdict is provided by God Himself: a scapegoat—someone else to take our place within that concentration camp—a scapegoat who will endure all the suffering that is ours. Who can and will do that?—only Jesus, our brother. He has lived our lives, borne our punishment, given us peace.

The Son of God Occasionally Jesus also called Himself the Son of God. His Father gave Him that title at the moment of His baptism. When appearing before Caiaphas, Jesus accepted that title. Caiaphas questioned Him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matt. 26:63 NIV). Jesus then answered, "Yes, it is as you say. But I say to all of you: in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64 NIV).

The Mediator was the Son of God; in fact, He had to be the Son of God according to the Scriptures and according to the will of God. Why? We've just used the allegory of a concentration camp filled with prisoners. Let's consider their sentence. In this life that sentence will only be for a certain period of time, but in the life to come there is eternal punishment, that is to say, it will never end. The worm will not die, nor will the fire be extinguished. And who can turn away this eternal wrath? Eternity can be known and averted only by someone who is eternal. Only God can endure the punishments of God. And it is Jesus, the Son of God, our Mediator, who has accomplished this. He did even more. Not only did He liberate us from eternal death, but He also gives us eternal life. "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:26 NIV).

The Christ of the Scriptures Jesus persuaded the two men of Emmaus by opening Holy Scriptures (the Old Testament) to them. In the same way, by letting the Bible live in our hearts, He convinces us that He is the Mediator sent by God. He accomplishes this through His Holy Spirit. Whenever we prayerfully read the Bible we will come to know its truth, and worship Jesus as the only way to God.

The whole Bible testifies to Jesus. In Genesis 3:15 we already read of the promised child. The prophets continually predict His coming (His lineage, birthplace, and humiliation). The paschal lamb foreshadowed the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world. The entire temple worship anticipated the great reconciliation that was to come (the epistle of the Hebrews deals extensively with this). And certainly the New Testament is very clear in its proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For this reason the Bible is the most important book in the world—the book under Satan's constant attack. The terrible persecutions of the early

church (roughly 300 A.D.) were also a persecution of the Bible: all sacred books were to be turned in and burned.

Though the Bible has always been subject to criticism, this has especially become true since the eighteenth century. People continually tried to show that much of the Bible was untrue or impossible. Yet time and again we see that the Bible is stronger than all the attacks levied upon it. Books that criticize the Bible are often outdated only a few years after they are written—but the Bible never becomes obsolete. Excavations in the Near East always support the validity of the Book of books.

For Adults Much reflection and strife has been recorded within the history of the church concerning the dual nature of Christ (divine and human). As with so many other miracles, it is easier to say what it is not, rather than what it is.

That is not such a bad thing really. We are rational people who want to understand and explain everything through reason. But God is much greater than our understanding. Yet, even though we cannot fully comprehend this mystery, we must simply take Him at His Word.

In the past some people did not do justice to the genuinely human nature of Christ, claiming that His body had not been real (Docetics). Others did not do justice to His truly divine nature by teaching that He was no more than a creature, albeit an exceptionally prominent one (Arians, and many modernists). Eutychianus spoke of a mixture of the divine and the human natures, while Nestorius saw the two natures as being completely independent of one another.

The Council of Calcedon decreed that both natures of Christ were united in the one person of the Son of God, unmixed and unchanged—(against Eutychianus) as well as undivided and united—(against Nestorius).

As the entire Bible testifies to Christ, the service of the Word should be Christ-centered. This does not mean that all parts of the Bible speak of Christ equally. Scripture can be compared to the body. The heart is the center, comparable to the gospels. The head, which reflects on things, can be compared to the apostolic epistles. The books of Moses can be thought of as the legs; the prophetic writings, the arms. Even nails and hairs are necessary, even though they do not occupy a central place. The laws of Leviticus and even the genealogies point in some way to the gospels

(preparation of Christ's coming, the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant). Nothing can be omitted. Curiously enough, a well-known critic, Prof. Sevenster from Leyden, was recently forced to admit that no other historical document was as reliable as the New Testament. Just as curious is the fact that many so called "results" of Bible criticism were later retracted by their authors.

We must be careful to distinguish between Bible criticism and *textual criticism*. Textual criticism is a necessary scientific effort to arrive at a reliable text. We do not have the original copy of any of the books of the Bible. The most ancient manuscripts (in the past, all books had to be copied by hand), dating from various centuries, must be distinguished from the original writing. Understandably, errors were made in copying, resulting in the fact that not all manuscripts are identical.

Textual criticism, which identifies those inconsistencies and attempts to return to the original, is therefore, a very useful science. Based on the findings of textual criticism, we can safely say that there is now a generally acceptable text which conforms to the original text.

In 1947 a number of ancient manuscripts were found in the vicinity of the Red Sea. These contained parts of the Old Testament (Isaiah and Habakkuk). From this discovery, Prof. Edelkoort concluded the following: "In the main, and in general, the text of our scroll (Isaiah) shows remarkable similarity to the text yielded by Kittle's third edition of the Hebrew Bible. In other words, from the second century before Christ to the tenth century after Christ, the text of this scroll has been painstakingly copied and we need not worry that the manuscripts dating from the tenth century are unreliable, because they are comparatively recent. *In the second century before Christ the text was generally the same.*"

As far as the New Testament is concerned, Prof. Grosheide wrote: "It is incorrect to say that we basically no longer have the (original) writings. In the first place, many critical textual difficulties can be solved. The uncertainties that remain are not critical. A famous English scholar estimated that only about one-thousandth part of the New Testament can be deemed questionable. Even more recent discoveries of very ancient fragments of the Bible (the Chester-Beatty Papyri) show that the currently accepted text has been in use since the second century. Textual differences certainly do not call into question any aspect of salvation. In fact, within the text these differences are completely meaningless."

We believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Peter wrote: "Above all, you must understand

that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (II Peter 1:20 and 21 NIV).

Such inspiration was not mechanical or automatic, as if God used people like typewriters, but it was organic. That is to say that God placed people in His service and used their capabilities and even their cooperation (Luke 1:1-4). Thus, even though each author uses his own language and style, the Holy Spirit makes their words infallible. He led them to discover and record all those things He had ordained for the church as the truth of God.

Accordingly, we reject the idea of dualistic inspiration, which holds that the Bible contains both inspired and non-inspired parts, as well as the idea of dynamic inspiration, which holds that while the authors may have been inspired, their writings are not.

Still another point of view is taken by Karl Barth. He said that the Word of God comes to us in three forms: first, in Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate; second, in the Bible; and third, in the preaching of the Word. According to Barth, the Bible is fallible and repeatedly fails. But God can use it as a vehicle to speak to us.

We maintain, however, that the reliability of biblical witness is beyond question, even when it concerns only a single letter (Matt. 5:18; Gal. 3:16).

On the Textbook

1. "They are so caught up in what they wanted to happen . . ." What does that mean here? Does that still happen?
 2. Cleopas and his friend could have known better. Why? How?
 3. How did the two men recognize the stranger as Jesus?
4. List, and be able to explain, the various ways in which Jesus is our Brother and wherein is He *not* our Brother.
 5. What is the point of the concentration camp analogy?
 6. Why did the Savior also have to be the Son of God?
 7. How does Jesus convince *us* that He is the Savior? Is Bible reading important? Do you read your Bible?
 8. What is "the mother promise"?

On the Bible

1. Read Hebrews 2:14-18. Explain how this passage talks about Jesus being "truly human." How is that a comfort for you? for the church?
2. Isaiah 53 talks about the Lord's servant. Who is He? Do the verses 4-6 help you understand why our Savior must be "true God"?
3. In Exodus 32:30-35 we read of Moses serving as mediator of the children of Israel. Read the passage and explain what the role of a mediator is.

For Discussion

1. The Jehovah Witnesses deny that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. They speak of Him as being "a god." If Jesus is not God, can He be our Savior?
2. There are many people who see Genesis 1-11 as prehistoric, or as a parable or myth. What happens to "the Gospel" which "God Himself began to reveal" already in Paradise when this is done? Is the good news rooted in historical events, or doesn't it matter?

Lord's Day VII

Illustration: **Acts 16:11-34**

We now move on to the topic of faith. There is a strange thing about faith. While some people consider it to be the most wonderful blessing in the world, to the point of being willing to die for it, others hate it with a passion, becoming its avowed enemies.

Consider what happened to Paul in Philippi. On the one hand, there was a splendid revelation of faith and, on the other, a powerful demonstration of unbelief.

Standing in the strength of faith, Paul could not remain silent about the Lord Jesus. As a result, several people came to repentance. He even performed a great miracle. A slave girl, possessed by an evil spirit and exploited by greedy owners, was exorcised, her actions no longer ruled by the demon. This was a sign of Christ's royal power, before whom even satan must give way. But satan puts up a tremendous fight.

You would have thought that everyone would have been glad to see this girl healed, deeply impressed with the fact that it took only a single word. But no. The girl's owners were enraged, for her misfortune had been profitable to them. Satan had used this girl as his mouthpiece, foretelling the future with uncanny accuracy. (See Lord's Day 34 about using means such as these.)

Not only were the owners, to whom the girl was financially indispensable, angry, but the gathering crowd also joined in the attack. "Who do these troublemakers think they are? Why don't they leave us alone?"

Paul and his friend Silas were seized by this mob. Just as the masses had once shouted for Jesus' crucifixion, so this angry crowd now brought their false accusations before the magistrates. Strangely enough, now that faith had been attacked, justice disappeared. Paul and Silas, emissaries of Christ, were stripped and beaten until the blood ran down their backs. Then they were locked up in a deep, dark dungeon, their feet fastened in stocks.

We can only marvel at this hostility against faith! But more marvellous still was the believers' resilience. Paul and Silas did not become depressed. Despite severe pain, they sang psalms.

Their fellow prisoners could not help but hear and wonder at it. God in heaven also heard them. He shook the earth, rocking the foundations of the prison, opening the prison doors. Yet none of the prisoners fled. Instead, they all gathered around Paul and Silas, the strangest choir they had ever heard, who had shown so much joy in their pain.

The poverty of unbelief was also evident. The jailer, who felt he would be held responsible for any escaped prisoner, was about to commit suicide. He felt he had lost his honor and could not stand the thought of facing his superiors. How surprised he must have been when he heard Paul shout: "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" (Acts 16:28 NIV).

The first rays of faith dawned in the jailer's soul. He was like a man who, staring into the depth of despair, is suddenly shown a sure way out. He promptly accepted Paul's message of the Lord Jesus. The enemy became a friend, immediately putting his faith into action by bathing the wounds of the apostles. He had come to believe both in word and deed.

Will All Men Be Saved?

It is clear from this story that not all people will be saved. A deep division runs through all of mankind—a division between believers and unbelievers. In Philippi we can see how sharp that division really is. There is no mutual acceptance—both sides are always at war. Believers use the Word of God as their weapon. With it they try to conquer the world for Christ, freeing unbelievers from their bond of sin. Unbelievers use a variety of weapons: imprisonment, torture, death; hatred and mockery; exploitation and cheating. Why is it that unbelievers resort to these tactics? Are there not also people who are neutral?

Basically though, there is no such thing as neutrality. A rational human being, one who can see and judge things, must always choose sides, especially when it concerns very important issues. He will do so whether he wants to or not.

A case in point is the Second World War, where no one could be neutral. The same is true when it

comes to Communism. Similarly, no one can be neutral with respect to Christianity, even though a great difference exists between open hostility and tolerant respect for civil liberties.

So why do unbelievers resort to these tactics? They do so because they want to remain in control, a tendency that has been a part of man ever since the fall into sin. They want to be like God! They want to govern themselves! They will not tolerate any form of authority! Why should they believe the authority brought by someone else, surrender themselves totally to something or someone beyond their control?

How then can they come to faith? How can their hearts be changed? Only God Himself can accomplish that! That is why He poured out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It is the Holy Spirit of God who will regenerate these unwilling hearts. If He did not do so, no one would believe. Why did Lydia of Philippi come to believe? The Bible clearly says: "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Acts 16:14b NIV).

The Lord did not do this for all the people of Philippi. Nor will He do so today. Faith is a gift of God and He can give it to whom He pleases. We should be thankful, therefore, that the Lord has given us this faith, and not delude ourselves into thinking that we have earned it. It was a gift of pure grace.

We might be tempted to think: "But then people who do not believe cannot really be held responsible for their unbelief!" But that is not so. Faith may be a gift of God, but this does not mean that a person is incapable of doing anything about his unbelief. Unbelief is no deformity with which we are born as people are born with blindness. Unbelief is always a responsible act or attitude, thereby incurring guilt. This guilt applies even to infants, since the tendency to hate God is also present (original sin) in their tiny hearts. This guilt grows each day, because despite the goodness that God shows them also, they continue to harden their hearts.

We have to remember two things: first, that faith is a gift of God which should always humble us before Him; second that all unbelief incurs guilt against God. We have to know both these points if we are to bring the gospel to others. They are free to listen but they *must* decide.

True Faith What is true faith? What are people to believe, and how? Faith is not something that touches only our intelligence. No amount of explaining and arguing

will force someone to admit: "Yes, I have to admit you're right so I'll have to believe it." It is not true that smarter people are better Christians. The scribes knew the Scriptures inside out, but this did not give them faith in Jesus. "If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (I Cor. 13:1 NIV).

Faith does not deal with mere feeling. Some people can be tremendously impressed by someone else's testimony. They can be moved literally to tears as they say, "Yes, I believe because I feel it in my heart." Yet for many people, feeling is the most important of all. They insist that a person must first have had an experience that really moved him, before he can really say he believes.

But feeling is not the sum and total of faith. In the parable of the sower Jesus speaks of people who hear the Word and accept it with joy. Their emotions are gratified; they are moved by it. But they have no root, and as such lack foundation. Their faith is only temporary and when trouble comes, they lose it.

Faith is not something for which we can take credit. Our good deeds will not persuade others to faith. These days, especially in North America, many people emphasize the importance of the so-called social gospel. This stresses that the church must change the world. It must solve war and create better working conditions. It should promote meetings, organize protests, and the less said about doctrine, the better. Of this attitude Paul wrote: "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (I Cor. 13:3 NIV).

True faith is something that affects man in his entire being. Every part of him stands in need of redemption. His intelligence has been corrupted—he has become headstrong and foolish. His feelings have been affected—they have become superficial, unreliable. His will has also been poisoned—he has become self-centered, stubborn.

There is only one way to be healed, and that is in Christ. The blind and lepers reached out to Him and He helped them. And today, anyone who reaches out to Christ with his specific need, will also be helped. To reach out to Him is to believe—and believing is done with the mind, the heart and all of life. With our minds we ask for the Word of God, listen to His voice, searching the Scriptures for His promises. With our hearts we completely trust the Lord Jesus as our only Savior. With our lives we follow in His footsteps and pray for His will to be done.

Decisive Things There are three things that are decisive for faith: the Word of God; the Spirit of God; and the church of God. Remembering Philippi helps this to become clear.

The Word of God No one in Philippi would have believed if God's Word had not been proclaimed. Where would man get to know about God, or learn about the name of Jesus except from God's Word? "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17 NIV).

The Spirit of God No one in Philippi would have believed if the Spirit of God had not been active. The hearts of Lydia, the jailer and of all the believers in Philippi, were opened by the Holy Spirit. That is why they believed. Faith was God's gift, which is why Paul later wrote to the Philippians: ". . . being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6 NIV).

The Church of God Did the church have anything to do with the events in Philippi? Yes, because the Word of God was proclaimed by an evangelist who had been sent by a church. Paul did not undertake missionary journeys on his own initiative. He had been called by Jesus, but was sent out by the church of Antioch. Paul himself said, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10:14 NIV). Paul also immediately established a church in Philippi and gave it the mandate to continue to proclaim the Word of faith in the world.

Personal Decision The church of God brings God's Word into the world and tries to persuade men to faith. But ultimately faith depends on a personal decision. Even people who attend catechism classes are called upon to make a decision by the minister who teaches them in Christ's name. I cannot just repeat what I have been told, but must confess from my heart that not only to others, but to me also, remis-

sion of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are clearly given by God.

The Articles Of Faith Having dealt with faith, the catechism immediately moves on to the articles of faith. Our form for the Lord's Supper does the same. Why? Are the articles of faith so terribly important? Surely they are not on par with the Word of God! No indeed, but that Word does require a response. In His Word God says: "I promise." Our response to this in the confessions is: "I believe."

This response is deeply personal, but at the same time, we make it in a church which encompasses millions of people through all time and place. We hear their voices also through the articles of faith. We hear what the church has always confessed and will probably continue to confess until the day of Christ's return.

Where Does the Confession Come From? An old legend has it that each of the apostles contributed an article. In a sermon, unjustly attributed to the great church father Augustine, we read, "Peter said: 'I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.' Andrew said: 'And in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord.' James said: 'Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.'" In this way all the apostles and all the articles received a turn.

However, the story is no more than a legend. The confession developed gradually and was completed in the fifth century. We call the confession "apostolic" because it preserves the teachings of the apostles. Therefore, every church worthy of the name Christian will embrace and profess the Apostles' Creed.

For Adults It remains a mystery for us that whereas faith is a gift of God, it is also true that unbelief makes us all guilty in the sight of God. Yet both these teachings receive great emphasis in the Word of God. A gift of God! "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8,9 NIV).

The guilt of unbelief is this: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather

your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate" (Matt. 23:37 and 38 NIV).

Attempts have been made to unify these teachings, notably through the doctrine of universal reconciliation. Long ago, this doctrine was already defended by the Arminians in this way: "All men have been reconciled and are accepted in the grace of the covenant, so that no one is worthy of condemnation under original sin." And the difference between those who obtain forgiveness of sins and eternal life and those who do not, "depends on their own free will, which joins itself to the grace that is offered without exception . . ." (Canons of Dort, II, Par. 5 & 6).

The participants in the Synod of Dort (1618-19) called this the Pelagian heresy (Pelagius was a contemporary of Augustine and taught that man's will was by nature good), and based their judgment on the text that "we were by nature objects of wrath" (Eph. 2:3 NIV).

The Canons of Dort teach three things:

1. That the promise of the gospel, that everyone who believes will receive eternal life, must be preached to all the nations;
2. That anyone, who remains in unbelief, is lost through his own guilt;
3. That true faith is a gift of God's grace, given in Christ from eternity—a gift He owes no one.

The doctrine of universal atonement is still held by many Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and some people of Reformed persuasion.

Karl Barth goes even further than the Arminians. He teaches that in Christ all people are both elect and reprobate. Every person is both a Jacob and an Esau. The difference between the church and the world lies in this: the church already knows about God's gracious election, and the world does not; yet both share in this election. According to this viewpoint, sheep and goats will never be separated and the call to faith and repentance loses its seriousness.

Still of importance is the old distinction of historical faith, temporary faith and faith in miracles. These are three forms of pseudo-faith which may appear to look like true faith but are not.

Historical faith is belief in Christ as one might believe in the existence of any historical figure. It accepts the historical facts of the Bible without changing anything in a person's life. An example of historical faith was King Agrippa, to whom Paul said: "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do" (Acts 26:27 NIV).

Temporary faith appears with a warm en-

thusiasm for Christ, but the glow does not last very long. True faith can be compared to genuine love that never dies; temporary faith is more like infatuation, possibly very intense, but of short duration. A case in point was Demas, one of Paul's fellow laborers, of whom Paul wrote to Timothy: "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone . . ." (II Tim. 4:10 NIV).

Faith in miracles involves a profound awareness of the omnipotence of Christ for whom nothing is impossible. It experiences an awe for the mighty acts of God, but does not look for the peace provided by the forgiveness of sins. An example of this pseudo-faith is found in Judas Iscariot. Even though he performed signs like the other apostles, his faith was not genuine. Of this faith Paul wrote in I Corinthians 13:2: "If I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I have nothing" (NIV).

On the Textbook

1. Why were not all the people of Philippi happy when the possessed girl was healed?
2. What does this story tell us about the power of unbelief?
3. Why is unbelief so hateful to the Christian faith?
4. Why did the jailer want to kill himself? What does that tell us about the "value" of unbelief? Why did he not kill himself?
5. What is the one thing that divides people? Is that true of *all* people? Is it possible for people to be neutral?
6. "What must people believe," and "how must they do that"?
7. Faith, says Praamsma, is not something *only of understanding, only of feeling or only of doing*. Does it include each of these? Explain. Why is it not a matter *only* of understanding? feeling? doing?
8. Explain the three things necessary for faith.

On the Bible

1. Read John 3:16-21. Who are saved? Who are not saved? (Remember, this is Jesus' word to Nicodemus.)
2. In Acts 26:27, 28 we read about Paul's talk with King Agrippa. What kind of "faith" did Agrippa have?

3. What kind of "faith" did Judas have? (See Matt. 10:1 and Mark 14:18-21.)
4. Read Luke 7:2-9. Why did Jesus say: "I have not found such great faith even in Israel"? What does this passage tell us about true faith?

For Discussion

1. It has been said that "historical faith" is THE danger facing Reformed covenant people. Why is that so?
2. Faith is a gift of God. Nevertheless, unbelief remains the responsibility of man. How do you "understand" that mystery?

Lord's Day VIII

Illustration: **Matthew** **3:13-17**

The story of Jesus' baptism is an amazing story. As a matter of fact, if you think about it carefully, you are faced with a

great mystery.

We read that John the Baptist preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4b NIV). How then could Jesus be truly baptized, seeing He had no need of repentance or forgiveness of sins? Actually the first thing John said to Jesus when Jesus approached him at Bethabara, where there was a shallow place in the river Jordan, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14B NIV).

We do not know if John had met Jesus before this. It is quite well possible because they were related. Jesus' mother, Mary, was a niece of Elizabeth, John's mother. The boys may well have visited each other occasionally or they may have met in Jerusalem. In any case, John was not yet aware of the fact that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:31-34), but he did know that Jesus was a greater prophet than he was. His respect for Jesus was such that it seemed very illogical to him that he should baptize Jesus.

Jesus made this remarkable reply however, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 5:15 NIV). To fulfill all righteousness is to do everything God requires. God required Jesus to become completely like sinners, not in the sense that He Himself would become a sinner, but that He would stand in the place of sinners. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (II Cor. 5:21 NIV). John, the servant, whose task it was to prepare the Messiah's way, was required to cooperate.

John obeyed, baptizing Jesus, thereby witnessing an extraordinary event. The clear blue sky above him broke open. Light poured down, and the shape of a dove descended on Jesus. At the same time John heard a voice from heaven which said: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17 NIV).

John remembered what God had told him at the beginning of his ministry. "The man on whom you see the spirit come down and remain is he who will

baptize with the Holy Spirit" (John 1:33 NIV). Then John knew that Jesus was the Messiah! The next day, when he again saw Jesus, John testified to his disciples: "Look, the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36 NIV). In fact, he knew more, for after that he would proclaim that Jesus was also the Son of God (John 1:34). Had not God revealed this to him personally?

What Had John Seen?

John had come to see Jesus as the Messiah, but he had also seen more than this—the sacred Trinity of God. He had heard the voice of God the Father coming from heaven. He had seen the Son of God standing in the river Jordan. Finally, he had seen the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove. Thus God had revealed Himself to John in a way that He had never revealed Himself to man before. He had revealed Himself as the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Did the Jews Not Know This Trinity?

Under the old covenant God had revealed very little about the Trinity to Israel. He had wanted to teach Israel one very basic fact—that there is only one God. After all, Old Testament time was one of constant struggle against idolatry. Abraham's ancestors had served idols. Rachel kept an idol in her tent. During the long journey through the desert, the nation of Israel had occasionally succumbed to idolatry. In fact, right up to the time of the exile, foreign idols had been worshiped in Israel. That is why Old Testament prophets had constantly hammered home this message: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4 NIV).

Yet throughout the Old Testament we can find traces of the Trinity. In the account of creation, we hear the Lord say: "Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness" (Gen. 1:26 NIV). During the construction of the tower of Babel, God said, "Come, let *us* go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (Gen. 11:7 NIV). We

also frequently read of “the Angel of the Lord,” who is both God’s emissary and also God Himself. This Angel visited the patriarchs and later on, Israel. For example, in Genesis 16, which is the story of Hagar’s flight into the desert, we are told that the Angel of the Lord found her sitting by a well. The Angel spoke to her, commanding her to return to her mistress Sarai. In verse 13 we read: “You are the God who sees me” (Gen. 16:13 NIV). The Angel of the Lord is called God here, for He was no one less than the Son of God, not yet become man, but visiting mankind.

The epistle to the Hebrews cites several texts in the Old Testament that mention the Son of God (Ps. 2:7; Ps. 45:7 and 8; Ps. 110:1—quoted in Hebrews 1). In Luke 4:18 and 19, Jesus Himself appealed to Isaiah 61:1, where we read of the Messiah: “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me . . .” Psalm 33:6 also makes allusion to Father, Son and Holy Spirit: “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath (His Spirit) of his mouth.” However, we can only fully understand these old covenant references in the light of the new covenant.

The Trinity in the New Testament

The birth of our Lord Jesus immediately introduces us to the Trinity: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. . .” (John 3:16 NIV). The Father sent the Son into the world, who became human through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity was first revealed to Israel at Jesus’ baptism. Jesus wanted His church to proclaim the Trinity to the whole world—in His farewell He says, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19 NIV).

Throughout this world, wherever Christians are found, they will bear the name of the triune God on their foreheads. This is why the Apostolic Confession was divided into three parts and is founded on the command given by Jesus in Matthew 28:19. It used to be that whenever a person was baptized, he was required to know the meaning of the words used in his baptism. Thus he had to be able to say: “I believe in God the Father; I believe in God the Son; I believe in God the Holy Spirit.” This confession was gradually expanded to comprise the twelve articles now confessed universally by the Christian church.

Can We Understand the Concept “Trinity”?

In the book of Job we read “How great is God—beyond our understanding!” (Job 36:26 NIV). We can know God, but we cannot understand Him. This should not dismay us; instead we should humbly and respectfully acknowledge that God is much greater than our limited understanding.

Our understanding limits us to this world with its measurements and numbers. However, God is much greater than this. He is present everywhere and we cannot understand this. For to our limited comprehension it seems incredible that He is present both in our homes, where He listens to us constantly, and also in the homes of millions of others. Yet He hears the prayers of all His children! He is present everywhere.

He is not bound by our understanding of time and space. As we see it, five loaves of bread and two fishes cannot possibly feed five thousand people, nor can there be twelve baskets of leftovers! Yet, according to John 6, that is exactly what happened in Israel.

When God reveals to us that He is one God, and not three, and that there is a unity in the three persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we must admit that this is too difficult for us. But with childlike faith we can accept this as true. Is God not greater than our understanding!

What Does the Trinity Say About God?

Trinity means that God is triune, that is, three in one. God is never alone; in Him we find the complete fullness of life and communion. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father; the Holy Spirit loves both the Son and the Father, proceeds from them both and returns to them again.

In the Athanasian Creed, which you will find in the back of the psalter hymnal (written about a hundred years after the death of Athanasius), the church tried to explain the Trinity as follows: “Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit: uncreated, incomprehensible, eternal and almighty. And yet they are not three eternals, uncreated, incomprehensibles or almighties. The Father is God and Lord, the Son is God and Lord, and the Holy Spirit is God and Lord; and yet they are not three Gods and Lords, but one. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.”

By this ancient creed the church tried to repeat what Scripture had revealed about God—and today we can't really add anything to this confession.

and work in us.

If this great God is for us, nothing and no one can stand against us.

**Why Confess
Such a
Mystery?**

Wouldn't it be better simply to confess God's unity? After all, Jesus did not teach us to pray, "Triune God," but rather, "Our Father, who art in heaven." Not only are unbelievers easily confused by this very difficult confession, but the church has also been torn by controversy over it. Why then should we wear ourselves out, putting human words to such an incomprehensible mystery?

The Heidelberg Catechism replies: "Because God has so revealed Himself in His Word that these three distinct persons are the one, true and eternal God." We are not permitted to confess less than what has been revealed in God's Word. Nevertheless, it is not at all surprising that in talking about God, we encounter mysteries that surpass our understanding. For He is indeed a great and almighty God in whose presence we must learn to be silent. But we must also sing,

His greatness far surpasses mind;
But praise Him still, oh humankind.

**The Joy
of Confessing
the Triune God**

The joy in confessing the triune God is this—He is not far away, living in some remote palace, but is a constant part of our lives. That is why the Catechism speaks of God the Father and our creation; God the Son and our redemption; and God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification.

Creation was the work of the triune God, but the work of God the Father was certainly most prominent. And He loved the world so much that He gave His only Son for its redemption. The work of redemption was again the work of the triune God, but here the Son was most prominent, for in becoming man, He bore our punishment. Sanctification is also the work of the triune God, but here we focus on the Holy Spirit, for it is He who comes to live in our hearts, making them into temples for the living God.

It is in the name of this Almighty triune God that we are baptized. The Father said to us that He would make an eternal covenant with us: the Son told us that He would wash us in His blood; and, finally, the Holy Spirit promised that He would live

For Adults

It was only after much controversy that the early church accepted the confession of the triune God. The primary point of contention was whether Christ was really and truly God. Athanasius († 373) was the great defender of this confession. His opponent was Arius. The Nicene Creed (325) clearly confesses the divinity of Christ. The Council of Constantinople (381) affirmed that the Holy Spirit, together with the Father and the Son, was also true and eternal God.

Article 9 of the Belgic Confession still reminds us of this great controversy, for in its conclusion we come across a list of names. They are the names of opponents of these historic creeds, people who were denounced by the church as heretics: Marcion, Manes, Praxeas, Sabellius, Samosatenus and Arius.

Marcion believed in two different Gods—the just God of the Old Testament and the good God of the New Testament. Manes taught that a number of lights had emanated from the one good God, the most important of which was Jesus. Praxeas taught that Jesus had been merely another form of God the Father, so that it was actually God the Father who had suffered (Patropassion). Sabellius was the leader of the so-called Monarchians, who taught that the Trinity was really no different from unity (Monarchy), much as the sun is said to have three aspects—appearance (akin to the Father), light (akin to the Son) and radiation (akin to the Holy Spirit). According to Paul of Samosata, the divine being was really only one person, and his logos (the Son) and sophia (Spirit), attributes of the one, single divine being.

Today the confession of the Trinity of God is hotly disputed by the Jehovah's Witnesses. They feel that the idea of Trinity conflicts with common sense and also reject the idea of eternal punishment. Placing their own ideas in the forefront, they then try to interpret biblical passages dealing with the Trinity and with hell according to these presuppositions. For example, Jesus' words: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30 NIV), are interpreted by the Jehovah's Witnesses to mean: "I and the Father are in agreement." The early Jews seemed to have understood Jesus much better, for immediately they wanted to stone Him, charging: "You, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:33 NIV).

The Jehovah's Witnesses also concentrate on the

biblical passages that suggest to them that Christ is subordinate to the Father. For example, Colossians 1:15 calls Christ “the firstborn over all creation.” Jehovah’s Witnesses take this to mean “the first creature.” But the following verses, “for by him all things were created” and “he is before all things, and in him all things hold together,” show this interpretation to be incorrect. The passages can refer only to God and thus serve as proof for the divinity of Christ. Thus, when He is called “the firstborn over all creation,” it means that His existence preceded the entire creation.

The same explanation is true for Revelation 3:14 where Christ calls Himself “the ruler of God’s creation.” This cannot mean that Christ was the first to be created, but rather that He has command over all creation. And John is quite clear about the divinity of Christ and Christ’s participation in the work of creation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made . . . The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us” (John 1:1, 2, 3, 14 NIV). Jehovah’s Witnesses take this to mean that the Word was a divine being; that is, an almighty, transcendent being. This heresy must be repudiated by the church.

On the Textbook

1. Why is the story of Jesus’ baptism an amazing story?
2. How did John know that Jesus was the Messiah? When did he know that?
3. “John had seen much more than this.” What “more” did John see?
4. Why did God reveal so little about the Tri-unity of His being in the Old Testament?
5. Mention some of “the traces” of the Trinity

found in the Old Testament. Can you explain how these passages speak of God’s Tri-unity? Can we understand God’s Tri-unity?

6. What was—and is—the confession all baptized people were expected to make? Do you?
7. Why is it important that the church confess the Tri-unity of God?
8. What do Father, Son, and Holy Spirit say to you through your baptism?

On the Bible

1. Where does the emphasis fall in Deuteronomy 6:4? Why?
2. Without God the Father there would be no Christmas. Without God the Son there would be no Easter. Without God the Holy Spirit there would be no Pentecost. Can you find Bible passages to support those statements?
3. Is the salutation in the book of Revelation (ch. 1:4-8) a confession of the Trinity? Explain.
4. On a Sabbath Jesus read from the prophecy of Isaiah, ch. 61:1ff (see Luke 4:16ff). After He read, He rolled up the scroll and said: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” How does this statement of Jesus underscore the fact that Isaiah was talking about the Tri-unity of God?

For Discussion

1. Deism, along with many cults, denies the Trinity. What becomes of man’s salvation in their teaching?
2. Articles VIII and IX of the Belgic Confession confess the Trinity. Discuss how these articles make this confession. Where does the emphasis fall?

Lord's Day IX

Illustration: **Genesis 1**

Here are four stories about the origin of the universe.

The Babylonians attributed the beginning of the world to their god, Marduk. Although Marduk was not the first god, he certainly was the strongest and most subtle. His mother, the goddess Ea, battled with the other gods, subduing all but one, the wicked Tiamat. After the monstrous Tiamat defeated his mother, Marduk continued the fight and succeeded in trapping him in a net. As Tiamat's jaws yawned open, Marduk cornered an evil wind into them, following it with a deadly arrow. Splitting open Tiamat's carcass, he used one half to form the firmament and the other to form the world. Spilling the blood of Kingu, commander of Tiamat's legions, Marduk creates men. This is an account of creation as Abraham's ancestors imagined it.

According to Scandinavian mythology, the world was created by a race of gods, primarily Odin, Hoenir and Loki. After killing a mighty giant named Ymir, they used his body to form the world. From his flesh they created the earth; from his blood, the sea; from his bones, the mountains; from his teeth, the stones; from his skull, the heavens; from his eyebrows, a dike to hold back the sea. The fertile land behind the dike became known as Midgard. To populate Midgard, Odin made a man (Ask) and a woman (Embla) from trees. Ask and Embla became parents of the entire human race.

Many people today adhere to evolution. According to this theory, the origin of all things is unknown, but basic to everything is matter and the energy that influences matter. Over a period of millions of years, certain changes were brought about through the action of energy on matter. The world gradually developed into its present shape and in time living organisms were generated from previously inanimate matter. Gradually the plant kingdom evolved and, much later, the animal kingdom. The ultimate evolutionary development within the animal kingdom is man. Thus man's ancestors were animals, ape-like creatures who themselves had evolved from lower life forms.

Evolutionary change came about as animals and plants adjusted themselves in their struggle for sur-

vival. Species slowly changed according to the demands of their environment. Darwin used the example of the giraffe. Because of its long neck and tongue, as well as its long front legs, this animal is now ideally suited to forage along the tops of trees for food. Long ago the giraffe must have had a much shorter neck and shorter front legs. But during periods of scarcity, only those members of the species whose neck and legs were long enough, survived. Only the fittest, most ably equipped, survived in the struggle for existence, while all the others perished. Gradually, through heredity, descendants received all the positive attributes necessary for survival. Through the continued evolutionary process, and through the increasing use of these already mentioned parts of the body, Darwin maintained that an antelope could possibly evolve into a giraffe.

According to Darwin's view, man is a product of chance; a beautiful poem merely the result of long evolutionary development; one of Bach's compositions the end result of a process that began with the howling of apes or the chirping of crickets.

In majestic terms and according to God's revelation, the Bible also gives us an account of the creation of the world and mankind. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . . And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good . . . then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

Who Is the Creator?

The book of Genesis speaks of God the Creator, but this Creator also said: "Let us make man." God did not say this to the angels, for angels are not capable of creating anything. He said it to Himself, to the triune God who created the world.

The Bible, therefore, speaks of the Son of God as

the Creator (John 1:3) and of the Spirit of God who hovered over the waters.

Yet our confession speaks of God the *Father* as Creator because the work of creation reminds us most of the Father—"through whom all things came" (I Cor. 8:6 NIV).

The Catechism calls Him the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This indicates that the world was not merely His plaything, but that He loved it so much that He sent His only Son in order to redeem it.

What Is Creating?

We sometimes speak of creative artists, people who make something original and unique—something that originated with them and to which they gave form. Yet the inspirational work of artists is always limited to the world they live in and the materials they have at their disposal.

The creative work of God is not limited in this way. When God creates, He Himself provides the means. This is the basic difference between creation and evolution. In evolution, one thing is always the result of another thing. Everything can be explained on the basis of something that happened earlier. But God's creative work cannot be explained by our reasoning. We only know that in the immeasurable riches of His thoughts (His decree), we were created.

When He speaks, it is. When He commands, it happens. "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the Spirit of the Lord, or instructed him as his counsellor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?" (Is. 41:12-14 NIV).

The Age of the Earth

The Bible does not tell us how old the earth is. We do not know when "in the beginning" was. We do not know how long the earth remained "formless and empty." Nor do we know how long the days of creation were, for they were divine working days. Educated men may make their own calculations, but God did not consider it necessary to tell us these things.

The Creation of Man

The crown of creation was man. God made him from the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils (Gen. 2:7). From Adam's ribs God created woman (Gen. 2:22).

Man, being formed from the dust of the earth, has a certain kinship to it; he is part of the earth, dependent on it, and may love it.

But man, created in God's image, with God's life-breath in his nostrils, is also related to God. He can only find rest when he acknowledges the presence of God the Father; he can only live when he follows God's Word; he can only find peace when he lets God into his heart.

God Cares for Man

God cared so much for man that He created Paradise for him. Even after man's fall into sin, the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ continued to care so much for those who belong to Jesus that, as the Catechism joyfully witnesses: "He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil He sends upon me in this vale of tears, He will turn to my good." God takes care of His creatures and redeems them in Christ Jesus.

The Creation of Angels

The angels were present at the creation of the world. Of this particular time the Lord said to Job: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation . . . while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4 and 7 NIV). We can deduce from this that the angels were created when the heavens were created. Unlike mankind, the angels do not descend from a single pair, nor do they marry. Through His omnipotence, God created them all at the same time.

The fall of a certain number of angels must have taken place before the fall of Adam, because Adam and Eve were deceived by the devil. But how a pure angel could suddenly fall away from God remains a mystery to us.

From the New Testament we know that arrogance, overconfidence and haughtiness (I Tim. 3:6) were his root sins. From this we can assume that at some point a very prominent angel sought to usurp God's place; many other angels, supporting him, also fell. It may well be that God also provided a test for angels, as He did for man, and that while a certain segment of the realm of angels remained true (I Tim. 5:21), another segment did not. In any

event, we must seriously consider the fact that creation is much more than meets the eye. For there are both good and evil spirits in the world around us. Evil spirits are like roaring lions from whom we need to be protected. Hence, the petition "Deliver us from evil." But there are also good spirits, as we read in Hebrews 1:14: "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to those who will inherit salvation?" (NIV).

For Adults The great theologian Karl Barth speaks of a creation saga. He calls the heathen accounts of creation myths, but the Genesis account is termed saga. Myths are little more than poetic expressions in which gods and men are identical. In contrast, a saga is a story in which human fantasy has grasped reality. Although Barth assigns the biblical account a higher place than pagan myths, he does not credit it with divine revelation—a revelation infallibly reliable in all respects. He does not, therefore, give an exegesis of Genesis 1, but only offers speculative suggestions. For example, in Genesis 1:2 we read: "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep . . ." A simple explanation is that this clearly depicts an unstructured creation, lasting a certain period of time. But Barth repudiates this, contending that it would be impossible for God to create chaos. The word chaos, however, is not mentioned. It would be much better to refer to the words "formless" and "empty" as an unstructured building site awaiting God's order. Barth though, explains the text in this way. There was the possibility of chaos here and that possibility was rejected by God. God could have, had He so desired, created chaos, formless and empty, but did not wish to do so. Barth's interpretation in this verse, however, is saga and not the revelation of God.

Excavations have yielded the remains of so-called prehistoric humans who presumably were our ancestors (e.g. Heidelberg, Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon men). According to some, these excavations prove that the cradle of civilization was somewhere in central Asia, but according to others, it was in central Africa. Such conclusions are based on hypotheses (scientific presuppositions) which generally change every decade or so. We should be very careful, since we have limited information about prehistoric times, as to what conclusions we draw.

Even with history of which we have written accounts there are many problem areas. For years disputes have raged concerning the proper dating

of the various books of Holy Scripture, because dating methods are still extremely unreliable. Sometimes the difference ranged centuries, and even now there is no agreement about some of these dates. We might well take to heart the conclusions of Prof. Broek: "Taken altogether, it must be said that our knowledge of fossils of anthropomorphic apes is as yet minimal. And, above all, that we have as yet no form of which it might be said with any degree of certainty that it represents the life form from which human life has evolved."

On the Textbook

1. Do you see any similarities between the Babylonian and Scandinavian creation stories?
2. Can you summarize the teaching of evolutionism? Wherein does it differ from the first two stories? Are there any similarities with the first two stories?
3. What does the Bible say about the origin of the universe?
4. "This is the basic difference between creation and evolution." Can you explain the basic difference?
5. How old is the earth?
6. What does it mean that man is "the crown of creation"?
7. Who was created first, man or angels?
8. What was the "root sin" of the devil? What does that mean for us?

On the Bible

1. The first chapter of the Bible records the creation story. Read it, then list the six acts of creation—in two columns of three. What do you find?
2. "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the glory of his hands" (Ps. 19:1). Who makes that confession? Do all people make that confession? Why or why not?
3. Read Romans 1:18-23. What does the creation say to all people? What does the unbeliever do with that information? Why?
4. How does the believer respond to God's creation work? (See Rev. 4:11; Ps. 104.)

For Discussion

1. Karl Barth (see "For Adults"), and many since him (e.g. H. Van Till in *The Fourth Day*), believe that Genesis 1-11 should not be read literally. How do they read it? What are the implications of such a reading?
2. What is the relationship between the Bible and science?
3. The Belgic Confession, Art. 2, talks about "two means" by which God is known to us. Is it possible to read the "book" of nature objectively? Can we read the Bible objectively? Why or why not?

Lord's Day X

Illustration: Jonah 1, and Jonah 4:6-11

The word "providence," introduced in Lord's Day X, is a most extraordinary word. Now it does not simply mean that God only knows what is going to happen. Such knowledge by itself would not be of much help to us.

There are people who covet such knowledge; they avidly read tea leaves and palms; they faithfully follow Jean Dixon's "What the stars foretell"; but does this really benefit them?

No, providence is more than mere knowledge. It means that God takes care of all things. They do not slip out of His control. He holds everything in His hand.

The well-known story of Jonah is a case in point. God told him to warn the great metropolis of Nineveh of impending judgment. Jonah disobeyed, thinking that he could run away, possibly find a place where God would not be able to find him. But God's providence, His ever present care, was soon experienced. All things are in His hand and even the storm raging at sea must be subservient to Him. "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up" (Jonah 1:4 NIV).

God used the storm to take Jonah out of the ship. After it had done the task God had assigned, it was allowed to subside again. "Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm" (Jonah 1:15 NIV).

Immediately, the Lord recruited yet another servant, a great fish. And, in the same way that Jesus later called fish into the nets of His disciples, God now summoned one great fish to the very spot Jonah had been cast into the sea. The fish swallowed Jonah. It must have been conclusive to the crew members that Jonah had drowned, but he was alive and well in the belly of the fish. God now gave him time to think. It took three days and three nights before Jonah prayed to God, confessing: "Salvation comes from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9b NIV). God then directed the fish to swim to the shore and "it vomited Jonah onto dry land."

Jonah finally warned Nineveh, proclaiming God's judgment. He then sat down at a place east of

the city, waiting to see what would happen. But a discontented voice inside him whispered that God would be much more compassionate on Nineveh, that old enemy of Israel, than it deserved.

At this point God recruited another servant: "Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give a shade for his head to ease his discomfort . . ." (Jonah 4:6a NIV).

But in order to teach Jonah to accept His will, God also provided a worm the next day "which chewed the vine so that it withered." And finally God called "a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint." All these were used by God in His service: the tree, the worm, and the wind. Later, Jesus said it this way, "Yet not one of them (sparrows) will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (Matt. 10:29 NIV).

The Beginning of God's Providence

The Bible teaches us that God created heaven and earth in six days, and then rested on the seventh. This rest concluded creation, and God rejoiced in what He had made, *but* it did not end God's work.

Jesus once said: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17 NIV). And Isaiah declared: "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary . . ." (Is. 40:28 NIV).

Immediately after creation, God's providence began. Nothing would ever exist without His permission and in Hebrews 1:3 we read that Jesus sustains "all things by his powerful Word." If God were to withdraw His hand only for a moment, everything would return to void.

The Extent of Providence

All things in creation, nothing excepted, are in God's hand. There is nothing too big, not even the largest star, nor too small, not even the

tinest atom, that is not in God's care. The story of Jonah teaches that God controlled both the mighty storm and the lowly worm. God provided Israel with shoes that never wore out in the journey through the desert, but He also gave them victory over Amalek.

It does not follow that God is active only where miracles occur, and that where no miracles occur only natural laws are at work. You see, there are no natural laws without God. God works in nature according to an order He has established, for He is a God of order. That is why we speak of natural laws. Of course, since they are God's laws, He is in no way subject to them. God's freedom with regard to His creation becomes evident whenever we witness a miracle. But even a miracle is nothing less than God's providence—God's ever present, ever active providence.

Providence means that every slice of bread on our table is given by God. Our entire lives, the place we live, the work we do, come from this providential God. We rest completely in His hand.

Providence and Sin

Sin is not from God, according to Job 34:10: "Far be it from God to do evil, from the Al-

mighty to do wrong" (NIV). Yet we must remember that sin is also under God's jurisdiction. It is not independent of Him, and not even the devil can do anything against God's will. When God chooses, the devil will be chained, and at His appointed time be released again (Rev. 20:1-3).

When Judas betrayed Jesus, it could truly be said: "The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him" (Matt. 26:24a NIV). This had to happen according to God's providential counsel. Yet immediately after these words we read: "But woe to the man who betrays the Son of Man!" Judas remained personally responsible for his evil deed (Matt. 26:24).

Co-responsibility In order to explain the peculiar relationship between human responsibility (and that of angels) and God's providence, we sometimes use the term co-responsibility. This does not mean that God and man are partners, each doing his share of the work, for without God man can do nothing at all. It rather means that man was created according to God's image, with a functional mind and will. It also means that God will never treat man as if he did not have intelligence or will, but rather as a creature who is

capable of making decisions—as a creature capable of accepting responsibility for his decisions.

Consider the example of taking a trip abroad. In order for the trip to become reality you have to make travel arrangements; visit places and friends; and book your return passage. But over and above your decisions and actions is God's jurisdiction. He either provides or denies the will, strength and opportunity for you to take that trip.

Sustenance and Rule

Through God's providence all creatures continue to exist, and we call this care His "sustenance." Through God's providence all creatures also achieve their goal, which is to glorify Him and to support His people. We call this God's rule.

Whenever we recognize God's rule, we should acknowledge it by praising His power. When Augustine's mother Monica saw that her son had been converted, she confessed it to be the rule of God. And when Napoleon returned from his Russian campaign, people said,

With rider, cart and steed,
The Lord defeated greed.

However, since we walk by faith, not by sight, we generally see very little of God's rule. Someday, when Christ returns, we will see that God's rule has been good. Presently it still seems as if we're looking at the wrong side of an intricate piece of embroidery—a confusion of knots and thread with only the rough outline of a pattern. One day, though, we *will* see the right side.

The Comfort of Providence

Have you ever been afraid of the dark? Jonah was afraid. As a matter of fact, he was terrified when he was thrown into the water! "From the depths of the grave I called for help . . ." (Jonah 2:2 NIV). Do you know who was probably frightened too? Joseph, when he was tied to a camel and transported on foot as a slave into Egypt. But God watched over both Jonah and Joseph.

God holds the whole world in His hand, always vigilantly guarding His children. That is why His children never have to be afraid, because God will never allow anything to happen to them without His will.

Even God's children are sometimes afraid though. There are times when they cannot see the Father, times when He seems to be so far away.

When people huddle together in a bomb shelter with bombs exploding over their heads; when two cars crash and people lie bleeding on the road; when floods and tornadoes devastate the country—where is God?

But He *is* there! He was with Jonah, and He is always with us. This is something we must believe—always. God is omnipotent, stronger and more powerful than anything or anyone. He promises “that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him,” and that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:28 and 39 NIV).

For Adults

Because God rules everything, chance or fate are non-existent.

Chance suggests that life is like playing dice—it could turn out one way or it could turn out another. Fate suggests that life is like an unmanned tank rolling along indiscriminately, crushing everything in its way; no one, not even God, can stop it.

But God determines and governs all things, erasing chance. He does this as a wise Father who hears the voices of His children, wiping out fate.

Some people make life a game of chance. They gamble their years away without using the intelligence or talents God has given them. They speculate on the stock market and continually hope to draw the winning number in a lottery. But they can hardly pray for God’s blessing, for they have forgotten that God wants to use them as His co-workers, asking them to make just and honest use of the talents He has given them.

Other people confuse God with fate. They think that everything has been predetermined, and that trying to prevent or avoid disaster amounts to a denial of God or at least resistance to Him. For example, they think that putting a lightning rod on a barn roof or buying an insurance policy against fire, accident or death, amounts to tempting God. These people also ignore their co-responsibility. God’s Word praises ants who store up their food in summer (Prov. 30:25). How much more then should people use their talents and wisdom God has given them to prepare for the future!

On the Textbook

1. God has many servants. Which ones are mentioned in this chapter? How do they serve?
2. What would happen if God were to “withdraw His hand only for a moment”?
3. Can you explain what is meant by co-responsibility?
4. What is the goal of God’s providential care for us?
5. How did Monica confess God’s providence?
6. Why is it that so often it seems “as if we are looking at the wrong side of an intricate piece of embroidery”? When will that change?
7. The comfort of God’s providence is that we never have to be afraid. Are you afraid sometimes? What should you remember at such times?

On the Bible

1. Read Matthew 6:25-34. What does it say about worry? Why do we not have to worry? What does God ask us to do?
2. In Romans 8:31-39 Paul tells the Christians of Rome—and us!—that they are “more than conquerors.” Why is that so? What makes Paul so sure of that? Can we have this confidence?
3. Psalm 104 sings of God’s providential care. Make a list of all the things that Psalmist mentions. Do you ever think of God doing all those things?
4. How does the story of Joseph illustrate both God’s providential care and our responsibility? Did Joseph understand that? (See Gen. 50:15-21.)

For Discussion

1. How do miracles fit in with God’s providence?
2. Providence does not ignore or destroy either our responsibility or our freedom. How can that be?
3. A Christian has no business buying lottery tickets and a Christian should pay no attention to horoscopes. Do you agree, disagree? Why?

Lord's Day XI

Illustration: **Acts 3:1-12**

"I believe in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord." This is the second article of the Apostles' Creed and in it we read the first name attributed to the Son of God—Jesus. It is the first name, but we can also say it is the only name; the only one through which we can be saved. This is why the church, if it is alive, will always be a mission church.

We should take special note of this. There are various so-called "world" religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. Yet all these religions are limited to a certain part of the globe, even though one may find mosques in Europe and North America and even though some Buddhist missionaries are being sent out into the world.

The Christian church though, has always been a missionary church, and if she does not respond to her mission mandate, there is something wrong with her. That is why you will find Christian missionaries throughout the world, and that is why young churches are planted next to old ones. The Church, you see, proclaims that one name; she can never say: "There are various ways leading to God and each person will have to find the way that suits him best." No, the Church will always speak of the one name, the one way and the one salvation. That was already so when the Church first began.

Shortly after Pentecost, Peter and John went to the temple to pray. At the temple gate called Beautiful, they met a crippled, middle-aged man. He had sat there for years, brought day after day by friends or relatives, for he had not been able to walk from birth. He was resigned to his disability, quite sure that he would never walk, and he lived off the alms passersby gave him.

But then Peter and John addressed him in the name of Jesus: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6b NIV). The man jumped to his feet and began to walk. He alternately walked and danced his way into the temple, praising God. This quickly drew a crowd, for most of the temple visitors had known the poor, old cripple for years, and were astonished at his recovery.

Peter uses this miracle to preach the gospel. He

stresses the fact that it was not John or himself who performed this sign, but that it was Jesus—Jesus, the crucified but risen Lord; Jesus, who lives and now calls Israel to repentance through this healing.

But this sermon was not too popular with the men of the Sanhedrin. They ordered the apostles arrested and silenced. But are they silenced?—or afraid?—did they say: "We promise to keep our mouths shut if only you let us go?" It didn't occur to them! Even though they were very simple men, confronted by highly educated scribes and Pharisees, they had the courage to speak up: "It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see" (Acts 3:1:6b NIV). Later they added: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12 NIV).

The apostles' intent was clear: "Men of the Sanhedrin, you may do with us as you please, but we will never stop speaking about the name of Jesus. We cannot help but talk about Him all over the world, because without His name people will be lost. How could we ever justify not speaking, not telling people about Jesus, the Savior of this world?"

The Name Jesus

The apostles repeatedly bear witness to a name. One might ask: What's in a name? It's only a word—what power can there be in a word? You have to realize though, that this name is more than a simple sound; this name signifies Jesus Himself, the living Savior.

Jesus is now in heaven, and yet He continues to be with His people until the last day. And whenever people call to Him in faith, He rescues them, giving redemption.

The Name Jesus in the Old Testament God had already revealed a little concerning this name in the Old Testament. In Hebrew it was Joshua and we read of two men by that name, both of whom were in some way a type of Christ. These two men performed deeds that foreshadowed work that would later be done perfectly by Jesus Himself.

The first Joshua was the successor of Moses. An entire Old Testament book has been named after him. He was a brave warrior who feared no foe and who led the people of God across the Jordan into the land of Canaan. In so doing, he provided the people of Israel with an earthly form of salvation after the forty years of deprivation in the desert.

The second Joshua was a high priest who, after the exile, led the people of God back into Canaan. He, too, typified the real Jesus, who leads His people to an eternal home.

The Name Jesus Given by God Himself The most important fact about the name Jesus is that God told Joseph, as well as Mary, that the newborn child had to be called Jesus.

The angel Gabriel said to Mary: "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus" (Luke 1:31 NIV). The angel of the Lord also said to Joseph: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21 NIV). So it was God Himself who had decreed what the child would be called. That was because the name Jesus signified exactly what God intended to do through Him.

Saved from Sins Jesus means "Savior." Whoever calls upon the name of Jesus calls upon the name of the Great Savior, and, if he does so in faith, the Savior will be there to help him. Most importantly of all, Jesus saves man from his worst enemy, sin. We see this clearly in the story of the cripple from Capernaum. He wanted so much to be close to Jesus, that he literally came through the roof of the house where Jesus was preaching. And Jesus saved him, though this did not mean that his health was immediately restored. Note what Jesus said to him: "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven" (Matt. 9:2 NIV).

Jesus did heal many people from their diseases. These people though, did later succumb to death.

Healing, you see, was only a sign; a sign of a much greater miracle yet to come. This sign was that Jesus delivered men from sin, the source of all misery in man's life.

His People The angel had said to Joseph that Jesus would save "His people" from their sins. This did not mean only the people of Israel, but encompassed all those who belonged to Him. Together these would be one people, a chosen race, given to Jesus by the Father: "Even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: 'I will call them "my people" ' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God' " (Rom. 9:24-26 NIV).

Jesus not only offers His people salvation: He actually gives it to them. He earned the forgiveness of their sins by dying on the cross, by pouring out His blood for them. But He also distributes salvation by placing it in the hearts of believers through His Holy Spirit.

"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37 NIV).

Salvation Through No Other Why does the catechism emphatically state that salvation is not possible from any other source? It is not only to guard against a myriad of false religions that offer salvation through an idol. The catechism also wants to suppress a thought that has repeatedly crept into the church—the thought that people themselves can contribute to their own salvation. Isn't it true that most people would rather try to jump across a fast-moving creek themselves, than be carried across by someone else, for they consider that beneath their dignity. Similarly, many church people consider it undignified to have their redemption depend entirely on Jesus. Christians have been known to believe that their justification was by law.

Paul dismissed such people as fools and warned them that they were "bewitched." "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so

foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Gal. 3:1-3 NIV).

People like the Galatians have appeared repeatedly in church history, and in the Roman Catholic Church the trend became: "Jesus does His share for salvation and we do too." They see Mary as the mediator next to Jesus. They often call upon saints to help contribute to their salvation, even going so far as to believe that statues of Mary contain miraculous powers. People themselves can contribute directly to their salvation through good works. They may not be able to remove the eternal punishment for sin, but they can bear some of the temporal punishment for themselves or even for others.

These foolish beliefs make a mockery of Jesus' redemptive work. He is the only Savior, and nothing short of His blood, the blood of God's only Son, can wash away our sins.

For Adults

In recent times, the doctrine of Mariology has been given a prominent place in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1854 she was declared immaculately conceived—in 1950 she was declared ascended into heaven. Thus both the beginning and the end of her life are seen as similar to those of her Son.

Note the following Roman Catholic eulogy: "Through Mary's permission Jesus has come into this world; through Mary, John the Baptist was brought into contact with Christ and thus sanctified; through Mary's intercession, Jesus' glory was displayed and He poured out His blessings. She is the mother of God and, therefore, taken up in the family of her Son, in the inexhaustible fruitfulness of the life of the triune God. She is called the daughter of the Father, the bride of the Holy Spirit. She is the queen of heaven. She is the interceding power. She is the mediator of all grace. We come to Jesus through Mary. She is often presented as the merciful mother who restrains the arm of her Son whenever He is about to strike the sinful world. Whoever honors Mary, will surely not be lost."

A former Roman Catholic priest, Rev. Van Puyvelde, stated that this eulogy, and many others like it, can be found in a large number of Roman Catholic books, and that the message of Mary worship is proclaimed constantly in Roman Catholic churches. He added that the Roman Catholic clergy daily offers official prayers to Mary's glory. Each year, two months are dedicated to honoring her. Prominent bishops have petitioned the pope to proclaim as church doctrine that Mary is the mediator

of all believers.

This teaching is a far cry from the simplicity of the Bible! The New Testament has no trace of Mary worship. Without a doubt, we should respect her memory, for she was blessed among women. We cannot imagine what it must have been like to be the mother of the Son of God! But Jesus was also her Savior. A woman once approached Jesus, calling out "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:27, 28 NIV).

Not one of the twenty-one epistles, written by the apostles and containing all sorts of teachings and counsel, mention Mary.

On the Textbook

1. Why is the church always mission church?
2. Who healed the crippled man?
3. Why would Peter and John not promise to keep their mouths shut?
4. The Old Testament name for Jesus is Joshua. How were the two Joshuas mentioned "types of Christ"?
5. Why did Jesus say to the crippled man from Capernaum: "Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven"? What does that tell us about Jesus?
6. "Jesus not only offers His people salvation; He actually gives it." Can you explain what that means?
7. What was the foolishness of the Galatians? Is there still evidence of such foolishness today? Explain.

On the Bible

1. In Matthew 1:18-25 Joseph is told of Jesus' birth. Write down the various things the angel told Joseph. Did Joseph believe what the angel said?
2. In Luke 1:26-38 Mary is told of Jesus' birth. Again, write down the various things the angel said. Did Mary believe what the angel said? Do you see any differences between these two birth announcements?
3. (a) Locate, and explain, passages in the Bible that show that Jesus is truly human. (b) Locate, and explain, passages in the Bible that show that Jesus is truly divine.

For Discussion

1. How does the Mariology, practiced by the Roman Catholic Church, affect the unity of the church? (See, **For Adults.**) Note: On January 1, 1987 Pope John Paul II announced the second Marian year. The first was held from December 1953 to December 1954 to celebrate the centenary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate

Conception. The second Marian year was celebrated from June 7, 1987 to August 15, 1988, the day Roman Catholics celebrate Mary's assumed bodily ascent into heaven.

2. (a) Why is the humanity of Christ denied? Who, typically, fall prey to this error? (b) Why is the divinity of Christ denied? Who, typically, fall prey to this error?

Lord's Day XII (1)

Illustration: Jesus now went to Nazareth, filled with the Spirit which had descended upon Him at His baptism! On the Sabbath, as usual, He attended the synagogue where He read from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus quoted from Isaiah because it was a Messianic text (see also Isaiah 61:10 and 11). He wanted to reveal Himself to His people as the Messiah. He told them clearly: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21b NIV).

This was an overwhelming message. People had looked for the Messiah since Adam's, and especially since Abraham's, time. Now this ordinary man Jesus, a man everyone knew, on this average Sabbath, suddenly declared Himself to be the Redeemer! Israel was expecting someone a little different than the son of an ordinary carpenter. Their Messiah would have to be an impressive figure, a conquering hero or passionate orator—someone who would free Israel from Roman rule and turn Jerusalem into the capital of the world.

Not unexpectedly the people resisted Jesus' message. As a matter of fact, they were so angered by the "outrageous" claims of this pretender that they wanted to throw Him off a cliff—a preview of the cross.

Thus Israel rejected the Messiah! Silver, gold, honor and power is dearer to the hearts of men than the kingdom of God.

Who Is the Messiah The words *Messiah*, derived from Hebrew, and *Christ*, derived from Greek, both mean *anointed*. Long ago, kings were always anointed. Even now the coronation of a monarch is accompanied by his investment with certain symbols of power and dignity. Anointing oil, an expensive perfume (Mark 4:3) was a combination of strongly scented flowers and herbs, possibly nard. It had a

refreshing and stimulating effect, embodying the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Messiah, the Anointed One, would be endowed with the fullness of the Holy Spirit. He would be enabled by God to perform the work of salvation hoped for by all believers.

As forerunners of the great Messiah (people who in limited fashion foreshadowed what He would later perfect), Old Testament kings, priests and prophets were anointed.

Kings Both Saul and David were anointed by Samuel, and thus became the Lord's anointed. God had set them aside to be kings over Israel, and through their anointing gave them special kingly gifts. They ruled by the grace of God, were His vassal kings and for this reason they were to be respected.

Their task was threefold: to *govern* according to God's law; to *protect* the helpless; and to *fight* against God's foes.

Priests The high priest was also anointed (Lev. 2:10-15), a ceremony in which the oil was poured out over his entire body, symbolizing that his whole life was now in sacred service.

His task was also threefold: to *sacrifice* for the forgiveness of sins; to *pray*; and to *bless* (remember Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist).

Prophets The Bible records only one instance of the anointing of a prophet (I Kings 19:16)—the anointing of Elisha. This occurrence may have been rare because this particular office was much less continuous than either of the other two. The immediate succession of one prophet by another, as with Elijah and Elisha, was exceptional. Usually a prophet was appointed directly by God with no human in-

termediary. But the spiritual side of the anointing, the call of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was common to all true prophets. Their task was to *prophesy*, to bring God's Word to the people.

Jesus Is the Messiah

God Himself appointed Jesus to be the Messiah through His baptism, when the Spirit descended upon Him. God Himself revealed Jesus as the Messiah in the synagogue of Nazareth. The apostles later proclaimed Him as the Messiah to all of Israel and to the world (Acts 2:36, 3:10, 9:22, 26:23; I Cor. 3:23).

Jesus is a personal name, containing complete salvation. Christ is an official name which signifies how He, as servant of the Lord, performed and completed His work. He is the great prophet, the only high priest, and the eternal king.

Prophet

"I can see that you are a prophet" (John 4:19 NIV). This was the spontaneous response of a woman Jesus had spoken to. How could she see that He was a prophet? Because He had told her the *truth*.

Christ saw through all things, including the human heart, nature, heaven and earth. He knew God's thoughts concerning all things, and He made these thoughts known to the people.

He taught them the ultimate meaning of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. He announced the coming of a new and eternal kingdom in the parables of the kingdom of heaven. He proclaimed His own suffering for the reconciliation of the sins of the world. He foretold His own future as well as the signs that would precede His return. He declared that He was the only source of life.

Priest

"This is my body given for you" (Luke 22:19 NIV). Christ has given His body as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

"When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here . . . he did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:11 and 12 NIV).

He also prayed His high priestly prayer for believers (John 17) and taught them to pray; and even now, He intercedes for them in heaven (Rom. 8:34).

He also blessed them when He ascended into heaven, and still continues to bless them through the working of His Holy Spirit.

King

Christ displayed His royal might over creation—He calmed storms and multiplied bread; over the devil and his entire realm—He withstood the temptation and cast out evil spirits; over His enemies when they shook before Him and were unable to touch Him without His permission; over sickness and death; and over His people whom He chose ("follow me"), preserved ("I have prayed for you that your faith would not lapse") and gave eternal life.

Adults

The idea of a Messiah is universal. All religions embody yearning for redemption and a redeemer. Thus Paul could say to the Greeks that he had come to proclaim someone whom the Greeks did not know but whom they had already worshiped (Acts 17:23).

It was precisely during Christ's sojourn on earth that many people shared this anticipation of a redeemer. The famous Latin poet Virgil wrote a poem in honor of his patron Pollio, a Roman consul, that a child would be born during his consulate who would descend from heaven and establish peace throughout the whole world. This child would crush the serpent and even bless inanimate creation. The two great historians Tacitus and Suetonius, also spoke of this expectation.

A century later, many false Messiahs appeared among the Jewish people, the most prominent of whom was Bar Cochba. He led a Jewish rebellion against Rome from 132 to 135, but perished in the attempt. All in all, there were no fewer than sixty-four false Messiahs among the Jews.

Even today people hope for redemption and a redeemer, but today, as yesterday, they cannot find him unless the Holy Spirit has come into their hearts. In fact, it is remarkable to see how easily modern man, reputed to be so enlightened, is tempted to deify his leaders (Hitler, Stalin), and attribute to them Messianic traits.

The vain search of the Jews for a Messiah should move Christians to make diligent attempts to proclaim the true Messiah to them (What do you know about mission work among the Jews, particularly in your own area?), and to all unbelievers. Is it not so that in Christ all nations of the world will be blessed!

On the Textbook

1. "He wanted to reveal Himself to His people as the Messiah." How does Jesus do that? How did He use the Old Testament Scripture to prove that?
2. What kind of Messiah had the people looked for? Why?
3. "Thus Israel rejected the Messiah." Why? How is that "a preview" of the cross?
4. How are the words *Messiah* and *Christ* related? What do they mean? How was this expressed in the Old Testament?
5. "They ruled by the grace of God." What does that mean? What, typically, was the work of kings in the Old Testament?
6. What was the work of the priests in the Old Testament?
7. Was there a succession of prophets in the Old Testament? Why? How do you explain that?
8. Jesus is the Messiah. Briefly sketch His work as prophet, priest, and king.

On the Bible

1. Jesus is prophet, priest and king. Look up the following texts and determine which office of Christ the text speaks of. (Note: It is important that you have a clear understanding of the mean-

ing of each of the offices.) Here are the texts; give the reason for your answer.

- (a) Matthew 7:29
 - (b) Luke 23:34
 - (c) Luke 24:19
 - (d) Luke 24:51
 - (e) John 7:46
 - (f) John 17
 - (g) Acts 28:19
 - (h) I Corinthians 15:25
 - (i) Hebrews 10:12
2. The name *Christian* means not only that you are a follower of Christ, it means also that you share His anointing. Can you find passages in the Bible that point out one or the other meaning?

For Discussion

1. Why is the Messiah-expectation (see **For Adults**) so common? Do you see any relationship between that expectation and the various peace movements and liberation movements of our day?
2. How must the Christian "see" the Jew? Recent trends among church leaders suggest that evangelism among the Jews is not really necessary—as long as they faithfully follow the teaching of the Old Testament. Do you think that the gospel of Jesus Christ should be preached to the Jews?

Lord's Day XII (2)

Illustration: **Acts 11:19-30**

"The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch." Why there? Because it was in Antioch that the Greeks first saw the difference between Jews and Christians.

The church in Jerusalem was predominantly Jewish. The message of Pentecost had not led to the conversion of many Gentiles. The persecution following Stephen's death led many believers to flee Jerusalem. They proclaimed the gospel to others, but generally only to Jews. But it was in Antioch, a city situated north of Israel on the Mediterranean coast, that the good news was also brought to the Greeks, and many of them came to believe.

This first Gentile Christian church took her task of sharing the good news seriously. Not only were they overjoyed by their own salvation, but they wanted others to share in it. They were true prophets, priests and kings.

Prophets: In Antioch the Word of God was proclaimed to a large number of people (verses 24 and 26).

Priests: When it appeared that a famine was imminent, each provided help according to his ability. They collected their gift and sent it to the church in Jerusalem.

Kings: They wanted to conquer the entire world for Christ and, significantly, it was the church of Antioch that became the mother church for Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. It was here that the name Christian first appeared, either given by Gentiles to differentiate from the Jews, or taken by the church itself.

What Are Christians?

Christians are people who belong to Christ. They are not only His as people are subject to a king, or children to a father, but have a much more intimate relationship. The Bible speaks of the members of a body, all attached to and ruled by the same head; it also speaks of branches of a vine, all nourished by the same stem.

The tie that binds Christians to Christ is that of faith, the act of surrendering the soul to Christ. The

tie that binds Christ to Christians is that of the Holy Spirit, ensuring God's presence in their hearts.

It was this Spirit who anointed Christ, endowing Him with all gifts necessary to discharge His office. This same Spirit also anoints Christians, enabling them to discharge their offices.

The Spirit descended upon Christ at His baptism. At the baptism of Christians, they are promised that the Holy Spirit will live and work in them and enable them to share in the work of Christ. Following baptism, they become prophet, priest and king under Christ.

The Office of Believers

All believers, children or adults, learned or simple, share in the work of Christ. The church does not classify Christians as though some were better than others. The chairman of the men's society, a speaker at a meeting, an elder or a deacon, is no more important than the rest of the believers, who perhaps only listen. No, all believers have been given the office of Christ with their own calling. One member may have five talents, another two, a third perhaps only one. Those members, though, who act as if they have no calling or gifts at all, will one day hear the Lord's judgment upon the "wicked and lazy servant." But what is the calling?

Being Prophet

Moses once prayed: "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" (Num. 11:29 NIV). This prayer was answered on Pentecost, when all present were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to declare the great deeds of God (Acts 2:4 and 11).

To declare, or speak of, God's great deeds is and will remain a calling for all in the church, for the church has to be a community of confessing members. We must, however, distinguish between various gifts in that community. Some people have a gift of speaking, and there are those who have great difficulty speaking. Some people are gifted

thinkers and others are better at manual labor. Some members are gifted intellectually, others tend to be very practical.

"Each one should use whatever gifts he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (I Peter 4:10 and 11 NIV).

Confessing the name of the Lord though, requires knowledge of His Word. We must know this Word in our personal life (read the Bible for personal devotion). It must be heard as a family (read and discuss a passage after each meal). "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4 NIV). We must feed it to our children in the learning process (send them to Christian schools and colleges). We should support its public proclamation (The Back to God Hour, Christian magazines and organizations).

All of these are vital in confessing the Lord's name in all areas of life.

Being Priests The Roman Catholic Church professes a separate priesthood, not including ordinary church members, which offers sacrifices. However, we have only one High Priest who says to us all: "But you are . . . a royal priesthood" (I Peter 2:9 NIV).

We no longer need to make sacrifices for reconciliation. That great sacrifice has been made once and for all on the cross of Golgotha. However, we do need to bring thank offerings each day. "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (I Peter 2:5 NIV).

In Acts 9:36 and Acts 16:15, we read that Dorcas and Lydia made such offerings. All of us, children included, can make pleasing sacrifices to God by asking ourselves: How can we be of help, both in our family and outside of it? Boy Scouts are called on to do a good deed every day. They set Christians an example.

One part of our sacrifice is made in the form of church collections. We must ask ourselves what each collection is for, giving according to our abilities. There are many collections, for God has so enriched our lives that we can support many things that require care

God loves a cheerful giver, and even the smallest

sacrifice can be of great worth in His sight (Mark 12:41-44).

Being Kings The church on earth is not the church triumphant, but the church militant. Thus Christians are kings actively engaged in warfare and not yet finally victorious.

Throughout his life the Christian must struggle against his own sins. These were Calvin's dying words to the Genevan clergy:

I had many faults which you had to bear; and everything I have done was basically of no value. The wicked may twist these words, but I will repeat them once more: everything I have done has no value and I am only a pitiful creature. The only thing I can say of myself is that I have always wanted to do what was right, that my faults have always disheartened me, and that the root of piety was truly in my heart. Because I meant well, I beg of you, forgive me all the wrongs and shortcomings—my irritability, passion and temper; and where, by chance, you may have seen something worthy of praise, accept that, modelling it.

We are always called to the battle, often against our own particular weaknesses, which we learn to see with increasing clarity as we study God's Word. But we are also called to battle against all the sinfulness in the world, which the devil would like to make his own.

It is not true that the Christian must always follow the path of least resistance. He must have the courage to face his conviction. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power . . ." (II Tim. 1:7 NIV).

Of course, this does not call us to be vindictive against "the evil papacy" as some were wont to be, nor must we be unmerciful toward unbelievers. Christ's love, and the love for our neighbor, should be obvious in all that we do. When the world sees Christians unsure and stumbling, it learns nothing. The world is best served by a clear proclamation of the truth and an equally clear repudiation of the lie. This battle is the Christian's duty in all areas of life.

The Special Office Christ rules His church using special offices, in which the prophet, priest and king characteristics clearly show. These offices are filled by

minister, deacon and elder.

Ministers (shepherds or teachers) discharge the prophetic office in a special way. It is their task to proclaim the Word of God to the church in Christ's name.

Deacons discharge the priestly office in a special way. In Christ's name, they must encourage the church to acts of charity, so using their gifts that there are no needy within the congregation.

The kingly office is discharged in a special way by the elders. In Christ's name, they rule the church, visiting members and maintaining discipline.

For Adults

The word "Christian" has been and is much misused. It has often been misquoted to designate all those who are not Jewish, pagan or Muslim. People also talk about an all-embracing type of Christianity which companionably includes many heresies.

True Christianity can exist only in the sense of Lord's Day 12 of the catechism. This Christianity, however, is not limited only to Reformed churches. There are also Christians of other denominations who conform to the catechism's definition.

This realization should lead to a shared Christian approach in all areas of social concern (school, politics, etc.), provided this approach is based on the Bible. Internationally speaking, Christians should cooperate with members of other churches, again provided this is done on a purely biblical basis.

Nowadays, however, it is popular to believe that Christians can cooperate with practically anybody. The Roman Catholic Church has resisted this teaching, but not for the right reason. It maintains that only the church hierarchy has absolute authority in all areas of life. Roman Catholicism, unlike Protestant churches, does not acknowledge the prophet, priest and kingly office of all believers.

We must argue against indiscriminate cooperation for different reasons than those given by the Roman Catholic Church. We preach the Word of God as the light for all of life. This means that all believers have the prophetic calling to bear testimony to the truth of God, both in personal and communal life. It also means that they have a priestly calling to compassionately show this testimony to the world by their actions. Finally, it means that they have a kingly duty to fight all heresies and false teachings. Thus any Christian organization must constantly examine itself to see whether it is faithful to this threefold calling.

On the Textbook

1. Why were the followers of Jesus first called Christians in Antioch?
2. How did the Christians of Antioch show that they really were Christians?
3. Can you explain what the book says about "the tie that binds"? (Note: It mentions it twice.)
4. The office of believers—what is it? Are you part of that? If so, how does it involve you?
5. What was Moses' great wish? When was it fulfilled? What does it mean for you?
6. Are you a priest? Explain your answer by using Dorcas and Lydia as examples.
7. "The church on earth is not the church triumphant, but the church militant." Can you explain what that means? How did John Calvin confess that?
8. What are "the special offices"? How do they function? Where? By whom?

On the Bible

1. "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power" (II Tim. 1:7). What does that mean? Is this text understood today by the church? Is the church prepared to fight the forces of evil?
2. In Romans 12:1, 2 Paul urges the Christians "to offer your bodies as living sacrifices." How are we to do that? What does that have to do with the sacrifices brought by the priests in the Old Testament?
3. Read John 15:26, 27. Does this passage help you to understand—and to fulfil—your office as prophet? (Read also John 16:14, 15; John 14:26; Mark 13:11.) Why are so many Christians less than fruitful in their speaking for Christ?

For Discussion

1. What do you understand by Christian action? Who is responsible for such actions? How does it come to expression? (Try to be specific.)
2. In the Roman Catholic Church the church hierarchy has absolute authority in all areas of life (see **For Adults**). How does that same tendency come to expression in the Protestant Church? Why? How must we respond?

Lord's Day XIII

Illustration: One of the most remarkable stories of the Bible is that of Isaac being offered as a sacrifice. It has been said that God could never have ordered Abraham to sacrifice his own child. Abraham must only have imagined that the Lord asked this of him. He must have argued that he would do no less for his God than pagans did for theirs.

Anyone who agrees with this theory might just as well give up his faith in the Bible altogether, for it quite literally says: "Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about'" (Gen. 22:2 NIV).

Remarks which change the meaning of Bible passages are referred to as Bible criticism. Bible criticism is a serious problem because it implies that people know things better than God Himself. Abraham really was given this strange command by God. He obeyed without criticism. With great sadness he mounted his mule, setting out with Isaac and two of his servants on the long journey to Moriah.

The journey took two days, and every step of the way he understood better that God had asked him to sacrifice that which he loved most. On the third day only he and Isaac went on. Willingly Isaac carried the wood for the fire, trusting his father completely. The only question he asked was: "The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7b NIV). With great dismay, Isaac must have realized eventually that he was to be the sacrifice, and yet he allowed himself to be tied to the altar, remaining obedient to his father until the very end.

At that point God interceded. He did not want human sacrifice. Instead, He sent a ram to take Isaac's place, and gave Abraham His marvelous promise: "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore" (Gen. 22:16 and 17a NIV).

The Only Son God did not want human sacrifice, later expressly forbidding Israel to make them. Why then this strange command to Abraham?—to test his faith and to teach him obedience to the end. However, He also did it to reveal to Abraham and his descendants a glimpse of the extraordinary truth that would someday have to happen—the sacrifice of an only Son.

The entire history and worship of Israel taught and prepared for the coming of Jesus. The sacrifice of Isaac is both an image and a prophecy of the sacrifice of God's only Son.

Lord's Day VIII dealt with the mystery of the triune God. It is a mystery we cannot fathom. But we know that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are eternally together, without beginning and without end.

The Father loves His own Son with a perfect love. In Proverbs 8 we hear Wisdom speaking, and that Wisdom, which is eternal, is the Son of God. In verse 30, the Son speaks of His relationship to the Father at creation: "Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence" (Prov. 8:30 NIV).

The miracle of our redemption is enormous when we realize that *this* Father, after the world had rejected Him, sacrificed *this* Son as an offering for our sins. So great is this love that even in eternity it is sung of with joy: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10 NIV).

Children of God

God has only one Son, and yet we read in the Bible that Adam was also God's son (Luke 4:38). How can this be? Well, compare it to a father who, though he has a natural son, is willing to adopt a foster child. The Son of God has the same nature as the Father, God of God, Light of Light. Adam had a different nature. He was made out of the dust of the earth, breathed on by God; he was not the same as his Creator but made in His image. God honored Adam with the title "son." By attempting to be like

God, though, Adam rejected this beautiful name and became God's enemy. Yet even then God did not abandon His disobedient children. Instead, He gave His only Son to be a sacrifice for their sins. And whoever believes in Him may again be known as a child of God: "God sent his Son . . . that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4 and 5 NIV).

However, there will always be a difference. Christ is God's eternal Son, and we have become God's sons in time. Christ is God's natural Son, but we are His adopted children.

The beauty of it all, though, is that we are on our way home to a Father—that His House is open for us—that His heart throbs for us.

Added Illustration: It's the end of all time, the last day on earth. Great things have happened: the Son of man, Jesus Christ, has reappeared on the clouds and descended. All people, both living and dead, have been gathered before Him. At His left stand unbelievers—at His right, the faithful.

But out of the crowd of unbelievers, voices are heard, wildly shouting: "Lord! Lord!" They seemingly attribute Jesus high honors. This is not the first time they have called upon His name, for in their life they have done great deeds in the name of the Lord Jesus. But they are rejected. "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers" (Matt. 7:23 NIV).

The name "Lord" is extremely important and is very meaningful in our lives.

Kyrios The name "Lord" reads "kyrios" in Greek. Those who owned slaves were called kyrios by their bond servants, but the name was used in particular for the emperor, who possessed ultimate power. And in the New Testament, the name is also used for Almighty God.

Thus it was of great significance when Jesus called Himself kyrios and allowed others to do so. The name kyrios affirmed His divinity and absolute authority over others. People who called Jesus kyrios put Him above the emperor, worshiped Him as God, and promised Him unconditional obedience. Thus Thomas, deeply impressed by the greatness of Christ, called Him "my Lord and my God."

The Right to Do So

The emperor had a human right to call himself "kyrios," for he ruled by the grace of God. Similarly, masters and slave owners had a human right to this name, for they had bought their slaves with silver and gold.

Christ also has the right to be called kyrios by believers, for He has given His own blood as a ransom for them: ". . . you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God . . ." (Rev. 5:9 NIV). Through their sins people became slaves of the devil and death. God's righteousness required that their sins be paid for. Life had to be exchanged for life, and Christ sacrificed His life for us.

The Redemption Obtained

It was the emperor's task to ensure and defend the rights and freedom of his subjects.

Our great Lord faithfully takes care of the slaves He has freed, giving them eternal life. "No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:28 NIV).

The Subsequent Calling

If we use the name "Lord," we must also do what He requires. Faithful servants defend the name of their Lord, serving and waiting on him. Compare the parable of the lord and his servant (Luke 17:7-10) and of the watchful servants (Mark 13:33-37).

For Adults

There has been much controversy in the church concerning the expression "the only begotten Son." There have always been people who taught that the Son was subordinate to the Father, arguing that the Son had been created by the Father before the creation of the world. They cite Colossians 1:15 which says that Christ is "the firstborn over all creation." But they forget what immediately follows: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth . . . all things were created by him and for him" (Col. 1:16 NIV). This clearly shows that Christ is the Creator, not a creature. The expression "firstborn over all creation" means that His birth preceded creation. All of creation had a beginning, but Christ did not. He is "the eternally begotten," and we speak of the "eternal generation" of the Son of God.

The expression eternal generation means that within the divine being and elevated above all time,

there has always been a relationship between Father and Son. The Son proceeded from the Father and represents the Father, yet in so spiritual a way that our human understanding cannot fully fathom this great mystery.

The Arians tried to understand this but in the process abandoned biblical revelation, succumbing to rationalism. The same error is made by Jehovah's Witnesses (see also Lord's Day VIII).

The expression "purchased with his precious blood" is taken from I Peter 1:18 and 19: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (NIV).

One may well ask: "To whom was the ransom paid?" Man was in the power of the devil. Did Christ then pay the ransom for our lives to the devil?

Kuyper once, very eloquently, replied to this:

No, the bond which binds you to satan and with which he held you was not a debt owed him, but a debt owed God. "Against you, you only have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4 NIV). It was to God, not to satan, that the ransom had to be paid. For it was not through satan's power that we came to be his, but only because of God's righteous judgment.

And could the Lord God be bought with gold? Are not all gold mines His? Does not the silver in a thousand mountains belong to Him? What would you offer Him that He does not already own?

Therefore, not with silver or gold, but only with His precious blood, wherein was life, has your mediator paid God for your eternal guilt. It was by paying that debt that the hold which satan had on us, according to God's decree, was broken.

On the Textbook

1. Did God really ask Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac? How do you know?

2. What is Bible criticism? Why is that a serious problem?
3. What evidence is there that Isaac trusted his father?
4. How does the sacrifice of Isaac point to Jesus Christ? Did Isaac understand that? Did Abraham? Do you?
5. "God did not abandon His disobedient children." How did God show that? What does that mean for you?
6. What does *kyrios* mean? Who bore that title? Who has the right to bear that title? Why?
7. Why must we do what Jesus asks?

On the Bible

1. Read Matthew 11:25-30. What does Jesus say here about Himself—who He is, and what His task is?
2. Read John 5:30-47. How does the Father bear witness to the Son? What is the role of the Scripture in that witness bearing? Why did the Jews reject that witness?
3. In the book of Revelation, ch. 5, the vision of the sealed scroll is recorded? Who may open that scroll? Why? What does that tell us about Him, who He is, and what He does?

For Discussion

1. "*Alle Menschen binne brüders*"—all people are brothers! So the humanist sings. How do you respond? Who is your brother? What does the Bible say?
2. "Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to Thee." So the Christian sings. What is he confessing when he sings this? Is it easy to live this way? Why or why not?

Lord's Day XIV

Illustration:

Luke

1:26-38; 2:1-7;

Matthew 1:18-25

The most beautiful story in the Bible is the Christmas story. Even though we have heard it innumerable times, it continues to hold us spellbound.

The mighty emperor Augustus ruled the (civilized) world at that time, and he decided, in order to increase his power through taxation and conscription, to have a census taken of all his subjects. Throughout Israel people were on the move, forced to return to their place of birth for registration.

Two people of royal descent, a prince and a princess from the house and lineage of David, traveled too. No one recognized them as such, for there was no prophet to witness of the promised Messiah, and no priest to pray for David's royal house. There was no king but Caesar.

Sin also lived in Bethlehem. Here, as anywhere, people were inclined to hate God and their neighbors. Although Mary had obvious need of a midwife, there was no one who extended her or Joseph a helping hand. As there was no room for them in the inn, they ended up in a stable. In this stable, the king of the world was born.

It was a very humble birth! Yet through it the prophecies were fulfilled (Bethlehem, Micah 5:1; David's lineage, Isaiah 11:1-5; "like a root out of dry ground," Isaiah 52:3).

It was a humble birth, yes, but also a divine birth! Children are always born from human parents, a father and a mother, but this little Child was not. Before the birth, the angel Gabriel visited His mother Mary. Imagine that mighty angel from heaven in Mary's small, simple room! He told her that she would have a child who would be called the Son of the Most High. She questions: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34 NIV). You see, at this time, Mary and Joseph were only betrothed, not married.

Gabriel told her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35 NIV).

Mary accepted this miracle in simple faith: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38 NIV).

Joseph knew nothing about all this. It must have come as a big shock to him when he discovered that his betrothed, whom he loved dearly, would bear a child. For him there was only one solution: to abandon Mary secretly, leaving her to her fate.

It was a very painful time for Mary and she dared not speak out. But God intervened by also sending an angel to Joseph. Isaiah's prophecy was repeated: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son."

They both waited for the child to be born. Who was this child? It was God Himself, now become man. It was the Son of God, who would be born as a child in order that He might live like us and bear all our sins.

God and Man

One of the most beautiful names of the little Child is Immanuel, that is, God with us. In Jesus, God Himself has come to us.

The great difference between His birth and ours lies in the fact that our lives begin at birth while His life existed before His birth. Jesus wished to be born, something we surely cannot repeat after Him. Psalm 40 says it well: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire . . . , burnt offerings and sin offering you did not require. Then I said, 'Here am I, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God, your law is within my heart' " (Ps. 40:6, 7 and 8 NIV).

In Hebrews 10:5-7, the words from Psalm 40 are applied directly to Christ. The passage shows that ordinary sacrifices in the temple were not sufficient to atone for man's guilt. A better sacrifice had to be made, one that no human could ever hope to bring. In His eternal counsel (the scroll) God had decreed that this perfect sacrifice would be made by His Son. It was for this reason that His Son willingly became flesh.

**Through
the Working
of the
Holy Spirit**

In the birth of Christ we see the work of the Trinity. The Father loves us so much that He sacrificed His only Son. The Son loves us so much that He humiliated Himself, becoming like us. The Spirit loves us so much that He descended from on high to form, in a way we cannot comprehend, the body of Jesus from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary. In the beginning, the Spirit hovered over the waters and generated life. At Jesus' conception, He generated divine life from the virgin Mary.

**Genuinely
Human**

Jesus Christ was the Son of God, but also the Son of Man. He was a real, ordinary child, born of Mary, a descendant of David, Noah and Adam.

He was a small baby—learned to talk and walk, played with other little boys and helped Joseph in his workshop.

He was also genuinely human in that He did not know everything (Mark 13:32), was capable of suffering (John 11:35), and needed food (Matt. 4:2) and sleep (Matt. 8:24).

He lived our life, but He lived it as the new Adam, always remaining, as we do not, obedient to God. In His human body and human soul, He bore the punishment that was ours (obedience-through-deed and obedience-through-suffering).

He was like us in all respects, yet differing in that He never sinned.

**Added
Illustration:
Matthew
2:16-18**

Shortly following Jesus' birth, the horrible murder of the little children in Bethlehem took place. The devil was on the rampage. He had tried to prevent the birth of the holy Child many times already. Just think of Egypt when all young Jewish boys were drowned in the Nile; or of Israel when an evil grandmother slaughtered nearly all her grandchildren (II Chron 22:10). Now satan struck again! A wicked king, a descendant of Esau, Jacob's perennial enemy, was instrumental in doing the will of the devil. He felt threatened by the birth of the Child and attempted to ensure his own position by ordering the death of all male infants, two years old and younger, in Bethlehem.

Imagine how hell celebrated while heaven wept! How the mothers mourned ceaselessly! "Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be com-

forted, because they are no more" (Matt. 2:18 NIV). How could God have permitted this? Shouldn't He have prevented this? The fact that older people die is understandable. Life must end at some point and no one is innocent. But surely little children are! What wrong can they have done?

**Are Little
Children
Innocent?**

What is guilt? Guilt means a wrong has been committed, and therefore, implies that a debt must be paid. When you stand guilty over against God, you owe Him something and payment to Him is required in the form of a pure heart and a pure life.

Do little children have a pure heart and a pure life? No one but God can look inside the heart of a small child, and He sees that even such a little heart is as sinful and misguided as the hearts of father Adam and mother Eve. It might be objected that this is not the small child's fault. Is it then God's fault? When we think about this, we have to admit that the fault is Adam and Eve's and, consequently, that of the whole human race.

God maintains the right to judge mankind, including small children. That is why little children, too, can die.

**Where Will
They Go?**

And yet, God does not abandon these little ones. The murder of Bethlehem's babies was already foretold in the Old Testament by the prophet Jeremiah. First Jeremiah spoke of the children of Israel's exile into captivity. But prophetically his words can also be applied to the children of Bethlehem who were carried away into death. Jeremiah also comforts weeping Rachel and all the mourning mothers. "They will return from the land of the enemy" (Jer. 31:16b NIV). And the children of Israel did return, they did arrive in Canaan again. The slain children also arrived in Canaan—but it was the heavenly Canaan.

By Whose Gift?

The infant Jesus, who died for their sins, gave them the life gift of the heavenly Canaan.

He lived our lives, you see, from the very moment of conception. This means that our sins were covered from the moment we were conceived and brought forth. Suffer little children, He said, to come unto me—for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Had He not opened the way Himself?

“. . . Godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom it pleases God to call out of this life in their infancy” (Canons of Dort, Chapter 1, Article 17).

The Joy of Christmas

Of all Christian celebrations, Christmas means the most to children. This is not because of the fragrant Christmas tree or because of exciting presents, but because the Lord Jesus has a special message for children: “I became a child, also for you. My Father loves you because I have come into the world.”

For Adults

Lord’s Day XIV is about the virgin birth of Christ. This virgin birth is constantly denied by more and more theologians, and not only liberal ones.

They are affronted by this biblical account because they feel it conflicts with the honor of marriage; they think it may have been influenced by pagan myths; and, they do not consider it necessary for God to have become man in this particular way.

Many theologians are irritated by the simplicity of God’s Word and the miraculous acts of God. This brings the doctrine of the two natures of Christ either in great danger or in direct repudiation.

In the nineteenth century, the primary difference between believers and unbelievers was the acceptance or rejection of the bodily resurrection of Christ. This difference still exists, though it is not as radical as a hundred years ago. Much more prominent today is the conflict surrounding the virgin birth, confirming the message that: “Unspiritual man does not accept the things of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him.”

The Roman Catholic Church has gone to the other extreme by making the virgin Mary central and attributing to her the following four aspects: eternal virginity, immaculate conception (without original sin), ascension, and coronation as queen of heaven and earth. Yet not one of these four Roman Catholic teachings can be found in the Bible. On the contrary, we read that Mary had more children (Mark 3:32), that Jesus placed her on par with all those who do the will of God (Mark 3:35) and that the apostle John took her unto his home. There is no other mention of her in Scripture, which certainly would have been the case if she had been intended to occupy the central position ascribed to her by the Roman Catholic Church. Roman Catholic

Mariology is idolatrous and consistent with the ancient pagan idea that a prominent male deity must always be accompanied by a gentle, female deity.

Although we radically reject the worship of Mary, we should honor her memory as “blessed among women.” Mary discharged the highest duty ever given to any creature. She became the mother of our Mediator who was also the Son of God. She fulfilled this difficult calling with a trust and dedication that should fill us with respect. And even though we do not pray “Hail Mary,” we should be thankful to God for her. She received her child from God in such an incomparable fashion, raised it with the greatest love a mother can give and yet had to keep surrendering that child until, at the foot of the cross, the sword of anguish cut through her heart.

We should never forget Mary’s song:

All generations from henceforth
Shall now my blessedness proclaim,
For He has done great things to me;
Mighty and holy is His Name.

On the Textbook

1. What do we know about the two people in this illustration? Who were they? Where were they going? Why?
2. “It was a humble birth, yes, but also a divine birth.” What does that mean?
3. Why did Joseph plan “to abandon Mary secretly”? What made him change his mind?
4. Why were ordinary sacrifices not good enough? Who brought the better sacrifice?
5. What evidence does the textbook give that Jesus was genuinely human?
6. Why did satan try to prevent the birth of Jesus?
7. Why are little children not innocent? Whose fault is that? Who can change that? How?
8. What is the joy of Christmas?

On the Bible

1. Satan made his attack on Christ throughout the Old Testament. He used not only Pharaoh, but also King Saul, Athaliah, Haman, and many others. Do you know each of the stories—of Pharaoh, Saul, Athaliah, and Haman—and can you tell how the devil used these people to attack Jesus Christ? What was satan’s fear?

2. Read Isaiah 7:10-17. Who was King Ahaz? Why did the Lord tell him to ask for a sign? (see also verses 3-6). What was the sign? When was it first fulfilled? (see also ch. 8:8). What is the relationship between Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23?
3. What does Paul say about the birth of Jesus in Philippians 2:5-11? Why does he say that?

For Discussion

1. The virgin birth is attacked from two sides (see **For Adults**). The liberal rejects it and the Roman Catholic supplants it by magnifying Mary. There is ultimately no difference between these two. Do you agree/disagree? Why?
2. The world is always looking for mediators, yet it rejects the only true Mediator. Why is that so?
3. The church that denies that only Jesus saves is—has become—a false church. Do you agree/disagree? Why?

Lord's Day XV

Illustration **John 1:29-34**

The man standing at the bank of the river Jordan was dressed in a cloak of camel's hair. His eyes blazed and his voice rang with power as he addressed the people.

Suddenly, he fell silent as his glance took in another figure approaching him. Then, stretching out his arm towards the approaching figure, he cried with a loud voice: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" In this way, John the Baptist made Jesus known to the people of Israel. The people of God had to be taught to know and recognize Jesus as the Lamb of God.

They should have recognized Him! The people of Israel could have known what was meant by the Lamb of God. The lamb had always played a very important role in their history. It was through the blood of the lamb, during the tenth plague when all of Egypt's firstborn died, that the people of Israel had been saved. Each Israelite family had been required to slaughter a lamb and dab the animal's blood on the lintels of their houses. As a result, the angel of death had passed their doors. They had not been saved because they were better than the people of Egypt. They were saved by the blood of the lamb, by a sacrifice which stood in their behalf.

The memory of this great preservation by the Lord had always been kept alive through the celebration of the Passover. Later the prophet Isaiah had given an even deeper meaning to the blood of the lamb. He had spoken of "the servant of the Lord" who would bear our punishments, bring us peace, and upon whom the Lord would visit all our iniquities. Of this servant Isaiah wrote: "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isa. 53:7 NIV).

The Lamb of whom Isaiah wrote was a person—a person who would come to remove all the iniquities of His people—a person who would offer Himself willingly on their behalf.

Thus when John spoke of "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," all Israel could have known that He represented the fulfillment of God's promises. This man would sacrifice His life on their behalf.

Jesus, the Lamb of God

The significance of the lamb was that it was slaughtered in the place of the people. Israel lived—the lamb died. Jesus, as the true Lamb, put Himself in the place of His people. Jesus bore the ultimate punishment for their sin (death), by taking their place (vicarious atonement). He was the Lamb that had been offered, not by people, but by God Himself. He was the Lamb of God!

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV).

The Sin of the World

John did not say "sins" but "sin." He meant sin as the single, devastating power of guilt, suffering, punishment and corruption; the mighty force that had ravaged God's beautiful world and branded all of humanity. It was sin and all it encompassed that the Lamb of God bore. Whoever believes in Him will be saved from sin forever.

Carried Away

Throughout His entire life Jesus bore the burden of sin on His shoulders. That was His constant suffering. The sin of the world was already on His shoulders in the manger in Bethlehem. Contact with sinful people who unwittingly made Him suffer without understanding or accepting Him, hurt Him time and again. Sin confronted Him daily in the temptations and challenges of the devil. It was most intense towards the end of His life, when the Father abandoned Him, and He agonizingly felt God's divine hatred of sin and His avenging wrath. In Gethsemane His anguish was not caused by any physical suffering. His agony and bloody sweat was because He knew the wrath and hatred of God against sin: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (II Cor. 5:21 NIV). Through all His suffering,

Jesus took away our sins. He stood in our place.

During the persecution of Christians in communist Russia, people were lined up against a wall. Every tenth man was to be shot. A young man of nobility, realizing that he would be one of those to die, began to shake uncontrollably. Beside him stood an aging priest, Alexei Stavrosky. He saw the fear of death in the young man's eyes and exchanged places with him.

The Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ, was sacrificed in our place because He exchanged places with us.

Illustration: Jesus stood before the judgment seat of Pontius Pilate.
John 19:1-16 Now a judgment seat is something that belongs to God. Through His common grace, God gave us justice. He could easily have left the human race to their own unrighteousness. The weak would have been at the mercy of the strong, and life on earth, after the fall, would have become hell.

But God has given us a sense of justice, the process of law and judges.

Once Frederick the Great, king of Prussia, wanted to expand his royal domain by adding the property of a miller to his own. But the man, unwilling to surrender his inheritance, warned the king: "Remember, there are still judges in Berlin." This appeal touched the king's conscience and he left the miller in peace.

The ancient Romans also had a highly developed sense of justice. God had endowed them with the gift of being able to distinguish between justice and injustice. Today, European universities still teach Roman law.

Pilate had available to him the best law of his time. As Jesus stood before him, it was possible for Pilate to execute fair judgment. The Roman soldiers had had their fun with Him. Mocking Him as king of the Jews, they had twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head. They had clothed Him in a purple robe, sneered at Him again and again, striking Him in the face. If a prisoner were treated that way today, the whole world would be scandalized!

Even though Pilate was firmly convinced that Jesus was innocent throughout this travesty, he did not dispense justice. Instead, trying to awaken possible pity, he called out dramatically: "Here is the man!" But the Jews screamed back: "Crucify! Crucify!"

Jesus then reminded Pilate of his responsibility. It was God who had placed Pilate on the judgment seat. "You would have no power over me if it were

not given to you from above" (John 19:11 NIV). Pilate was now afraid, but his fear of the Jews was greater. They were aware of past injustices he had committed and threatened him with Caesar. He could not afford to offend them.

Then the greatest mockery of justice that ever took place in the history of the world happened. The only, truly innocent man who ever lived, was sentenced to death. He was sentenced by a judge who knew the law but surrendered to the pressures of injustice.

Innocent Jesus' innocence was clearly proven in the best court available at the time. Pilate would gladly have made use of any testimony against Him, but there was none.

Guilty Nevertheless Appearing with the unrighteous judgment pronounced by Pilate, was the righteous judgment of the Father. Jesus was condemned as "the man," the one who represented us all with our sins. God's righteous judgment was "guilty" of those sins. Mankind, you and I, from least to greatest, deserved that verdict. We deserved to be placed, as Jesus was, outside of the law.

The Cross Crucifixion was a terrible way to die. It is a slow death in which the human body gradually breaks down, hour by hour, while the victim is fully conscious. Many a condemned man has asked his executioner to hasten death. But crucifixion delays death and stretches the suffering interminably.

It was unlawful to crucify a Roman. It signified a slow, disgraceful slave's death. To the Jew, crucifixion was a sign of the curse of God: ". . . anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:23 NIV). In Israel a corpse was sometimes hung on a tree, given over totally to God, as if to say: "We have executed him, Oh God, but our punishment was not enough. Chastise him more." It was punishment after death: that is, the curse of God, damnation.

Good Friday Superstition has it that Friday is an unlucky day. In the early Christian church, it was a day of fasting. The cross

of Christ was horrible, and the world has never seen such suffering since that day. Yet we commemorate that day as Good Friday. You see, on that day all our guilt was paid in full. When a bill was paid in those days, the recipient would write under it "in full," or in Greek, *tetelestai*. Jesus used the same word as His last word, *tetelestai*, meaning: "It is finished."

For Adults

For whom did Christ die? Arminians and Reformed differed on this point. The former believed that Christ died for all men, and that salvation depends on their free will. In other words, it is up to man to either accept or reject Christ's offer of salvation. In contrast, the Reformed cited John 10:15 and 27: "I lay down my life for the sheep . . . I know them." They firmly stated that the promise of the gospel had to be proclaimed to all people accompanied by a call to repentance and faith. They continued to say that unbelief was not caused by an inadequate sacrifice on Christ's part, but by one's own fault. On the other hand, "as many as truly believe, and are delivered and saved from sin and destruction through the death of Christ, are indebted for this benefit solely to the grace of God given them in Christ from everlasting, and not to any merit of their own" (Canons of Dort, Chapter 2, Article 7).

The Catechism does not say that Christ has reconciled the sins of the whole human race, but rather that "He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race."

The difference between these two statements may appear to be slight, but it is nevertheless important. It raises the question: Is grace really grace, that is, reconciliation without man's contribution? Is sinful man really dead through transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1); or is he still a little bit alive? Can we contribute, albeit in a small way, to our redemption? Or do we have to be redeemed completely?

History teaches that whenever man is given say over a small matter, his independence and self-righteousness will soon claim credit for much more. Think of the doctrine of good works of the Roman Catholics and the modernizing tendency among Arminians.

The Sign of the Cross

When Constantine, who later became the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, faced the most crucial battle of his life, he appealed to the God of the Christians. Under oath he stated

that a shining cross appeared high in the clouds with the inscription: "In this sign conquer." At that moment Constantine adopted the sign of the cross for his banners and ordered his legions to inscribe it on their shields.

Very likely, Constantine saw a natural phenomenon. Sun beams broken by ice crystals in the air may give the appearance of a halo, perhaps a cross. Such phenomena still happen today. In any case, it remains a wonderful sign of God's providence that this happened precisely at such a crucial moment in Constantine's life. Consequently, the cross became a symbol for the Christian faith.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the cross has been endowed with supernatural power, e.g., the kissing of the crucifix, and the often used "sign of the cross." That is why this sign has almost completely disappeared in Reformed churches.

In the last decades, however, it is reappearing. For example, the Huguenot cross is often worn as a necklace. There are no objections to this as long as no superstition is attached to it.

On the Textbook

1. The people "should have recognized Him." Who? Why? How?
2. What role had the lamb played in Israel's history?
3. Isaiah had spoken of "the servant of the Lord." Who was he? What would he do? How?
4. Can you explain what the term "vicarious atonement" means?
5. Why did John speak of sin rather than sins?
6. For how long did Jesus carry the sin of the world?
7. Why was Jesus brought before Pilate? Who gave Pilate authority? Why did Pilate decide to let the people crucify Jesus?
8. Was Jesus guilty? Explain your answer.
9. Why does the church commemorate "Good Friday"?

On the Bible

1. Luke 22:39-46 tells us of Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Rephrase this in your own words. What did Jesus say and do? What did the disciples do? What did the angel do?

2. Leviticus 16:1-28 explains the ceremony of atonement. Why were there two goats? What happened to the one goat? Why? What was done with the other? Why? Does Jesus fulfill the place of the one or the other or both goats?
3. Because of his sins man faced God's: wrath; judgment; curse. By His substitutionary atonement Christ provided: grace; acquittal; blessing. Can you find passages, both in the Old and the New Testament, that teach these things.

For Discussion

1. "For whom did Christ die"? (See **For Adults**.) What makes the Arminian position so attractive? Can Arminianism still be found today? Who still believes its teaching? Why is that so serious?
2. A cross should not be worn by a Christian in the form of jewelry, neither should they display a cross in their homes or churches. History shows that the temptation is simply too great. The cross becomes an object of worship and people tend to put their trust in that object. Do you agree/disagree? Why?

Lord's Day XVI

Illustration: Jonah 2

The largest underground cemetery in the world is found on the outskirts of Rome. Thousands upon thousands of first and second century Christians were buried here in the catacombs.

You can easily lose your way in the long, winding tunnels that spiral their way underground. A guide will point out numerous recesses hollowed out into the sides, containing the remains of early believers. The walls between feature many frescos. One picture that keeps on recurring is that of Jonah and the great fish. Through this motif the early Christians expressed their faith in eternal life.

The early believers were well-versed in Scripture. They knew the story of the unwilling prophet who refused to go where God had sent him. It seemed that he had received the death sentence for his disobedience—was he not cast into the raging sea?—did he not disappear into the jaws of a sea monster? Who would have expected Jonah to return to the land of the living? But he did! Jonah returned like one resurrected from the dead.

Later, what happened to Jonah, also happened to Jesus. In fact, when the Jews pressed Jesus for a sign, He prophesied: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40 NIV).

Jonah's being swallowed up by a fish was punishment for his disobedience. This was clearly shown to the crew members, since it was important for them to know that the God of Israel punished sin. Similarly, the death of Jesus was a punishment. Everyone on earth should know that God punishes sin. Had God not said in Paradise that any man who would eat of the tree would surely die. For this reason, Jesus, who took the place and the sins of mankind, had to die.

Through God's grace, though, Jonah's punishment did not last. There is an end to punishment for sin! Jesus also rose from the grave, but this was not through grace. He rose because He had completely fulfilled the requirements of God's justice. Everyone who believes in Jesus will, like Jonah, be swallowed up by death; but, he will also be delivered from it! One of the inscriptions found in

the catacombs reads: "In Christ Alexander is not dead, but lives above the stars. Only his body rests in the grave."

The Death of Christ

Christ really died. His body and soul were separated. He said to the criminal on the cross: "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43 NIV).

This is precisely what happened. After He had said: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46 NIV), His spirit ascended to heaven. His body, though, remained behind as a sign that God's judgment on sin had been carried out.

The Burial of Christ

Christ's body was then buried. Joseph of Arimathea had the courage to ask for His body, thus, without realizing it himself, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. "He was assigned a grave . . . with the rich in his death" (Is. 53:9 NIV).

The Catechism says that this burial was proof of His death. This is true if one realizes why Pilate had granted permission for His burial. Pilate had first asked the officer of the guard whether Jesus was really dead. He must have heard that the soldiers had pierced Jesus' side with a spear and that blood and water had flowed from that wound. The Romans knew this meant death. That is why Pilate had released the body to be buried, and the burial amounted to proof of Jesus' death. Otherwise the possibility remained that He might only have appeared dead when He was buried; graves in the ancient Near East were large enough for a person to survive in for a considerable period of time.

Burial was the last step in the humiliation of Jesus' body, and therefore, of His entire person. Thus He also fulfilled the prophecy: "Dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19 NIV).

Christ's Death and Ours Christ did not have to die for Himself; He had never sinned. But He died *for us*; He died to take away our sins.

If this is true, why do we still have to die? Why can't we, like Elijah, be taken up into heaven by fiery horses and chariots? Surely, that is not too hard for God to do?

One day, God will do just that. On that day of days, all believers "will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (I Thess. 4:17 NIV). In that same moment they will all be changed (I Cor. 15:52), and will not die.

This is special, though, to that day. On that day, you see, glory will begin; heaven and earth will be renewed and all believers will be glorified. At this point in time, they are not yet glorified. In this life we share the image of the suffering Christ, to whom we belong; but after this life, we will be given the image of the glorified Christ. This is a matter of faith. If all believers were to go directly to heaven without dying, faith would no longer be faith. That is why we, like Jesus, must go down to the grave. But when we die, we may believe that we will go to heaven. For death is no longer the gateway to Sheol, but to Paradise. Cemeteries should remind us of the prophet Jonah. In the same way he spent a little while inside the belly of the fish, our bodies must spend some time in the earth. And just as God saved Jonah, so He will also resurrect our bodies from the grave.

Death and Baptism There is a close relationship between Christ's death and our baptism. This is expressed in the prayer found in the formulary for baptism: "That they may be buried with Him through baptism into death." It is a strange thing to ask, that a small child be buried through his baptism. What does this mean?

The words come from the epistle to the Romans: "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were, therefore, buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the death through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:3 and 4 NIV).

To understand these words properly, we have to realize that baptism, at that time, nearly always took place by immersion. Baptism by immersion can be compared to being buried; the water closed over the head of the person being baptized, as completely as a grave. His subsequent emergence from the water could be compared to resurrection from

the grave. In other words, the grave of baptism symbolized Christ's grave and the baptized believer shares in the blessing of that grave. The blessing is not only that he need not fear the grave at the *end* of his life, but also that his old nature has gone into the grave long before death.

What is this old nature? It is the nature we have inherited from our father Adam; our unwillingness to serve God; our selfishness, indifference and wickedness.

Baptism says that Christ has reconciled all evil through His death. But baptism also says that through His own death Christ has put an end to the dominion of evil. Those who have truly been baptized in Jesus and who truly *share* in Him are no longer under the dominion of evil. They will be troubled by sin to the end of their lives, but they will continue to fight against it because they love Jesus. Therefore, the old nature is increasingly buried in the grave and Jesus increasingly becomes the glory of our lives.

Both death and the grave witness to the work Jesus did *for us*; but they also witness to the work done by Jesus *in us*.

Descent into Hell Was Jesus in hell? We don't read anything about that in the Bible. On the Saturday following Good Friday, Jesus' body was in the grave and His soul was in heaven. At His resurrection, His body and soul were reunited once again. Why then does the apostolic creed speak of descent into hell? Because it has to be emphasized that through His suffering Jesus not only conquered death and dethroned the power of sin, but also that He invaded hell and demolished the power of satan. Christ's conquest over hell was accomplished through His entire humiliation, but we see it most specifically in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross of Golgotha. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ saw all the anguish of hell approaching Him; on the cross of Golgotha He experienced that anguish directly, especially during the three hour period of darkness.

The anguish of hell is, on the one hand, the complete removal of God's grace and, on the other, total exposure to the venom of satan. As mediator, Jesus bore all this anguish in order to free us. If we genuinely believe in Jesus, we don't have to be afraid of anything in the world, not even satan. Jesus helps us, and His strength will always prevail.

The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little Word shall fell him.

For Adults In Matthew 12:40 it is written that the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. How can this be reconciled with the actual time Jesus spent in the grave (Friday evening until Sunday morning)?

The Jews understood three days to be either a whole day or part of one. That is to say, any part of a twenty-four hour period was considered a full day. Therefore, although Jesus spent only a part of Friday and a part of Sunday in the grave, these would count as full days to the Jews.

Modern liberal theologians do not believe in an actual hell any more than in an actual heaven. One of them, a Dr. Banning, wrote: "When past generations of believers, to wit, before Copernicus, spoke of 'heaven' and 'hell', they meant certain designated areas in the universe, giving them material reality. We can only understand these terms symbolically, representing a spiritual reality." The constant hallmark of liberalism is its tendency to symbolize biblical historical truths, retaining the name of an event but clouding the issue with conjecture.

The most radical forerunner of liberalism in the nineteenth century was a David Friedrich Strauss. He was the first to describe the account of Jesus' life as mostly mythical and said the following: "Christ's supernatural birth, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension will remain eternal truths, however much we doubt their reality in history."

This is a very poor point of view. Suppose that you're hungry and someone says: "Just close your eyes and imagine a succulent steak right in front of you." The image is so real you can smell the steak. Remember that spiritual reality is important, but historical reality doesn't carry that much weight! Will this change the fact that you're hungry?

The Bible teaches that there is a real, actual, historic heaven and hell. Jesus' ascension into heaven was real, not an illusion. Moreover, Jesus was very clear about the eternal fire prepared for the devil, his angels and unbelievers (Matt. 24:41). The message is so clear that we cannot possibly doubt its reality.

Admittedly, we are hard put to define this reality.

Like modern liberals, Jehovah's Witnesses also

do not believe in the existence of hell. They do believe it symbolizes death. According to them, all people will first go to hell where they will continue to live subconsciously until the first resurrection. We believe, however, that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus clearly teaches that the great separation between believers and unbelievers, comes at the moment of death.

The Roman Catholics and Lutherans also have a rather curious interpretation of the descent into hell. Both see it, not as the last phase in Christ's humiliation, but rather the first step of His glorification. According to Roman Catholics, Christ first went to hell to liberate the souls of Old Testament believers who had been kept in a purgatory of sorts, and to escort them triumphantly with Him into heaven.

According to Lutherans, Christ first went to hell to announce His victory to the devil. In one of his sermons, Luther said that Christ pounded on the door of hell with His cross, making the devils scatter in all directions in terror.

This may be fascinating material for stories, but we find no evidence of it in the Bible.

On the Textbook

1. What are catacombs? How did the early Christians use them? Why?
2. Why was the story of Jonah so popular with the early church?
3. How did Jesus use the story of Jonah?
4. How does the story of Jonah portray the ministry of Jesus?
5. How do we know that Jesus really died? Is that important? Why?
6. "Death is no longer the gateway to Sheol, but to Paradise." Can you explain what that means?
7. What is the relationship between Christ's death and our baptism? How does immersion illustrate that relationship?
8. "The old nature is increasingly buried in the grave and Jesus increasingly becomes the glory of our life." What does this mean? Is this happening in your life?
9. What does it mean that Christ "demolished the power of satan"?

On the Bible

1. Read Isaiah 53:7-12. What does the prophet say about the servant's suffering? about his death? about his burial? How is this fulfilled in Christ? Can you find New Testament passages to prove this?
2. What does Hebrews 2:14-18 say about the death of Christ? What is the point/message of this passage?
3. In 1 Peter 2:24 we are told that Christ "bore our sins in his body on the tree." What is the significance of that statement? (See Gal. 3:13 and Deut. 21:22, 23.)

For Discussion

1. Why does liberalism deny that the death of Christ is the atoning death for our sins? How would you answer Strauss? (See **For Adults**.)
2. Since "death has been swallowed up in victory" (see 1 Cor. 15:54) Christians do not have to fear death. As a matter of fact, Christians who are afraid of death are not very good Christians. Do you agree/disagree?

Lord's Day XVII

Illustration:

Matthew 27:57 -

Matthew 28:10

Whoever heard of guarding a grave? What can you expect a corpse to do? And what should Jesus' disciples do now? Not

one of them, paralyzed with fear as they were, had raised a finger to help Jesus, their master, when the people had shouted: "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" There was also fear in the hearts of the Pharisees and scribes, because they clearly remembered Jesus' words: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19 NIV). Hatred makes sharp ears, and . . . suppose it was true! So they urged Pilate: "Give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day" (Matt. 27:64 NIV).

It is this fact that provides the most convincing proof of the truth of Christ's resurrection. After all, no Roman soldier would have panicked at the sight of a couple of Jews; nor would they sleep at their post. No, for these highly trained soldiers to have left the place they were to guard, something really spectacular must have happened that Sunday morning following the crucifixion.

There were no human witnesses. No one actually saw Jesus rise from the grave. But the soldiers certainly must have felt the violent earthquake that took place. Their hearts must have been in their throats as the ground trembled and shook under them. Then they suddenly noticed the large stone covering the mouth of the tomb had been rolled away and someone was sitting on it. "His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow" (Matt. 28:5 NIV). That was too much even for those hardened soldiers. They panicked . . . "and became like dead men." They missed seeing the crucified Jesus emerge from the mouth of the tomb. There was no trace of death on Him as He stood there—the Resurrected Lord—a Conqueror—a King. He walked onto the earth and the Word was fulfilled: "The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the fields will clap their hands" (Isa. 55:12 NIV).

Where did He go then?—because when a few women approached the grave at this time, He was no longer there. They had gotten up at the crack of dawn in order to embalm their Savior's body. Now they were bewildered. On the way down they had

been worried as to how they were going to move the huge boulder that sealed the tomb. But the stone had already been moved! As they entered the tomb, their confusion grew. Where was their Master's body? As they stared helplessly at one another, close to tears, they saw the angel sitting on the stone, and another angel close by. Their clothes gleamed like lightning and in fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground. But the angels said to them: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee . . ." (Luke 24:5 and 6 NIV). Afraid, yet filled with joy, the women returned to Jerusalem. And on the way, they saw the living One, the One who would never die again. Jesus met them calmly, with a greeting, as though it were any other day. The women fell down before Him, clasped His feet and worshiped Him. What else could they do? Was He not the Son of God, the Conqueror of death?

At that moment the gospel of Christ's resurrection began. The women carried it to Jerusalem. Jesus Himself appeared to His disciples. Soon it would spread all over the world. We have a King who has conquered death; the most powerful King who ever lived.

How Could This Happen?

There have always been people who have not believed the gospel of the resurrection. The first who refused to believe it were the Jews, resorting to a conscious lie. They bribed the soldiers to say that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. It is a lie that is believed to this day.

In the nineteenth century the gospel of the resurrection was denied by liberal theologians. Despite the clarity of the Bible passages, people refused to believe, saying that resurrection from the dead was impossible to accept in this day and age. Who had, after all, ever seen a corpse return to life and where was the proof to substantiate it. Accordingly, quite a few ministers openly proclaimed that the message of resurrection was only *spiritual*, and that the *body* of Jesus never rose from the grave.

Skepticism in Christ's resurrection was the result of another form of unbelief: *unbelief in death*. You can look at death in two different ways. You can see it as punishment for sin, or as something that happens naturally: something that has nothing to do with sin but something that is the fate of every living thing: trees, butterflies, animals and man.

If death is only a natural phenomenon, then Jesus did not rise from the dead. Why should He, a mortal, escape the fate of mankind? But if death is punishment for sin, then Jesus has indeed risen—for sin is the cause of death. And Jesus had conquered sin on the cross. Through His resurrection it became clear that His victory over death was radical and complete. How could God keep His Son in the prison of death when He had completed reconciliation for all of man's sin?

Pardon Resurrection, therefore, means release or pardon from the death sentence. Jesus ascended into heaven and showed His Father all the work He had done. The Father then said that His task had been accomplished and that payment for sin had been made.

To prove that the death sentence had been remitted, *Jesus was allowed to rise from the dead*. This resurrection took place "for our justification" (Rom. 4:25), that is, for our pardon.

We are free The emphasis must fall on *our* pardon, because Jesus had no need for pardon Himself since He had never committed sin. He has obtained freedom *for others*. Was that enough? The resurrection says yes. God has accepted the work accomplished by His Son. In Christ's resurrection, God pardons all who belong to Him. That is the relationship between Christ's resurrection and our justification.

Sanctification There is another connection: the relationship between Christ's resurrection and our sanctification. Sanctification means that in our whole life, including our thinking, speaking and doing, we have become new people—people who continuously learn to do what Jesus asks.

We become changed people! Notice how the women changed after they learned that Jesus had risen. They were filled with joy! Think of Mary of Magdela, Thomas, Peter who was restored to his apostolic honor, and Paul who was called by the resurrected Christ while on his way to Damascus.

You see, people *are changed* through Christ's resurrection. Christ breathes new hope into the Christian's heart, gives him a new goal and through this provides a new life. "In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3 NIV).

Glorification There is a third connection: the relationship between Christ's resurrection and our glorification. Glorification means that we will one day be given a glorified body, no longer subject to death, which will be united with a glorified soul.

In His resurrection, Christ has already been given such a glorified body, no longer subject to the anguish and temptations of this world. His royal body could appear and disappear at will. It ruled over the laws of nature, and could ascend into heaven. Such a body has also been promised to us.

Jesus said to His disciples: "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19 NIV), and Paul said of Christ that He "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21 NIV). That glorified body will no longer be subject to the laws of marriage (Luke 20:34 and 35) nor to the needs of eating and drinking (I Cor. 6:13).

Just as the body of Christ went into the grave and rose again, so will ours: "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (I Cor. 15:42-44 NIV).

The Passover Easter is not merely a spring festival symbolizing renewal of nature; neither does it mean Easter eggs and Easter bonfires. The renewal of nature in spring is, of course, a beautiful thing and we thank God for it. But if this were all Easter meant to us, we would be among the poorest of men.

Easter is a continuation of the ancient Passover. We learned earlier that Passover really meant "passing by." Just as the angel of death passed by the doors of those Israelites in Egypt who had dabbed blood on the lintels of their houses, so death now passes us in the blood of Christ.

Paschal Lamb, by God appointed,
All our sins on Thee were laid;
By almighty love anointed,

Thou hast full atonement made.
All Thy people are forgiven,
Through the virtue of Thy blood;
Opened is the gate of heaven,
Peace is made 'twixt man and God.

For Adults

Liberals used to teach that Jesus was not actually raised from the dead but did continue to live on in the memory of His disciples. More recently, however, they have taught that Jesus, although He was not physically raised from the dead, appeared to His disciples in a vision. They hold this as a realistic portrayal of the resurrection. Both points of view violate the biblical account of the resurrection and are directly related to an unwillingness to accept the meaning of death.

There is something else. If you only believe in a "spiritual" resurrection of Christ, then you cannot, ultimately, believe in a renewal, that is, the fact that God will one day renew all created things. If a spiritual renewal is sufficient, why should our bodies have to arise from the grave? And why should this entire world need to be renewed?

The reverse is also true: if Christ rose physically, His glorified body implies a glorified new earth. Here we note that the teaching of liberals concerning the resurrection of Christ resembles that of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses also deny Christ's physical resurrection. They assert that Christ's body was removed from the grave and was either destroyed or taken to some other place.

It is extremely sad that such fantasies receive wide acceptance.

On the Textbook

1. Why was Jesus' grave guarded? Why "until the third day"?
2. No one actually saw Jesus rise from the grave, so how do we know that Jesus arose?
3. Why did the women go to Jesus' grave? Should they have gone there?
4. You can look at death in two different ways. Summarize those two ways. What does that say about Jesus' resurrection?
5. How is our pardon related to Jesus' resurrection?
6. What does sanctification mean? How is our sanctification related to Jesus' resurrection?

7. Glorification means that we will one day be given a glorified body. What does that mean? Do you look forward to that?
8. What is the meaning of Easter? How is it related to the Passover?

On the Bible

1. Read I Corinthians 15:1-11 about the resurrection of Christ. With regard to this passage, answer the following questions:
 - (a) What gospel did Paul preach? Why?
 - (b) Why did Christ die?
 - (c) Why was He raised?
 - (d) To whom did Christ appear? Why does Paul mention this?
2. Read I Corinthians 15:12-34 about the resurrection of the dead. With regard to this passage, answer the following questions:
 - (a) If there is no resurrection, then what?
 - (b) How are Christ and Adam related?
 - (c) How long will Christ reign?
 - (d) What must He accomplish?
 - (e) Who is the last enemy?
 - (f) What does the phrase "I die every day" mean in verse 31?
3. Read I Corinthians 15:35-58 about the resurrection of the body. With regard to this passage, answer the following questions:
 - (a) How does Paul answer the "foolish" questions some people ask?
 - (b) What does "so will it be with the resurrection of the dead" refer to? (see vs. 42).
 - (c) How are "the first man Adam" and "the last Adam" related? What does that mean for us?
 - (d) "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (see vs. 50). How does Paul explain this?
 - (e) How are death, sin and law related?
 - (f) What is our certainty? What does this mean for our daily living?

For Discussion

1. Liberals, and the Jehovah Witnesses also (see **For Adults**) deny the resurrection of Christ. Yet they speak of a "New World" and of a "Peaceable Kingdom." Why can you not have the one without the other? Why do they not see that?
2. Since Christians are to set their hearts and minds

on things above (see Col. 3:1-3), it follows that they should have nothing to do with the things of this world. This especially includes politics, and also covers big business like the stock market. Do you agree/disagree? Why?

Lord's Day XVIII

Illustration: **Acts 1:1-11**

Following His resurrection, Jesus remained on earth for forty days. This is a number which surfaces more often in the Bible, also with regards to Jesus' life. We do not know why He remained on earth for exactly forty days. In any case, this seemed long enough to show His disciples that He really had been raised from the dead and to open their eyes about the coming of God's kingdom. But even during the latter part of this extended time period, it was difficult for the apostles to understand that kingdom. If you have always thought a certain way, it is difficult to change those views. At the end of the Second World War, certain Japanese in Brazil refused to accept the fact that Japan had lost. It had been so ingrained in them that the emperor was invincible, that their minds could not accept this.

After Jesus had taught them for forty days, the apostles were still so filled with Jewish patriotism that they asked Jesus: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? (Acts 1:6 NIV). They could not see Jesus beyond an earthly king on David's throne. But Jesus tells them they have to wait.

One day there will be a *visible* kingdom of God on earth, because Jesus will return in glory to make all things new. But when that shall be is known only to God the Father. But now the kingdom of God has already arrived too. It extends throughout the world, from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This kingdom, though, is not of this world; this kingdom is the gathering of all people who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is to be found wherever He is worshiped.

Jesus taught His disciples these things as He walked with them from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. When they reached the top, something quite incredible happened which astounded the disciples. Jesus spread out His arms to bless them, ascending, as He did so, into heaven.

Throughout His life, Jesus had performed many signs. He walked on water. He once entered a locked room without having been let in. Yet His ascension was the greatest miracle the disciples had ever seen Jesus perform. It was something that

would never be repeated. He ascended higher and higher into the sky until finally a cloud hid Him from their sight. The disciples stared fixedly until a voice addressed them: "Men of Galilee." Turning they saw two men dressed in white standing beside them, and realized immediately that these were angels. "Why do you stand here looking into the sky?" the angels continued. "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11 NIV).

So now Jesus is in heaven. But one day He will return. From now on all believers can live towards the day of Christ's return. This is why we now are said to live in the last days (Acts 2:17). Jesus promised, though, that the Spirit would descend on the believers. But after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, no extraordinary work of redemption would happen again until Christ's return.

What Is Heaven?

Jesus ascended into heaven. But what or where is heaven? People have scoffed at the idea of heaven. Not one astronomer, they say, has ever been able to find a trace of heaven even with the help of a telescope. The fools! As if everything God has created can be seen with a telescope.

The old prophet Elisha was in Dothan once. Now this city was surrounded by Syrian troops, bent on capturing and killing him. Elisha was not afraid, but his servant was terrified and groaned: "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" (II Kings 6:15b NIV). "And Elisha prayed: 'O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (II Kings 6:17 NIV). It was a heavenly army visible to no one, not with binoculars, or any amount of learning. No one can see heaven unless God opens their eyes and allows them to see it.

But where is heaven? We don't know. We do know that it was created by God in the beginning; that it is a place where He revealed His divine majesty, seated on His throne. We could say that

heaven is the palace of our king, a palace so beautiful that sinful people stand in awe before it.

The prophet Isaiah was allowed to glance into heaven once and saw the Lord sitting on a heavenly, high throne. Seraphs surrounded Him and continually called out to each other: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3 NIV). Isaiah, usually a powerful speaker, could only stammer: "Woe is me! I am ruined!" (Isa. 6:5 NIV).

Revelation 4 has this to say about the throne of God: "And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God" (Rev. 4:3-5 NIV).

Heaven is the palace of our King! That is why Jesus, the Son of the King, when He had accomplished all His Father's work, had to return to that palace. He left heaven as God and returned to it as both God and man. When He returned, He was given the place of honor. "Therefore God exalted him (according to his human nature!) to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11 NIV).

Is Jesus Very Far Away?

We do not know where heaven is; it may be closer than we think. There are people though, who say that if Jesus really went to heaven, He can no longer be with us. And they continue to say that this is not possible because He Himself said that He will always be with us to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

Lutherans are especially persuaded by this. They believe that Jesus did not really ascend into heaven, but that He, since the ascension, has been present everywhere, not only as God but also as man. This is a strange point of view. If Jesus, as human, is omnipresent, it goes to follow that His body is present invisibly, even here in this room. We do not read this in the Bible. But we do read that Jesus says: "Now I am going to him who sent me" (John 16:5 NIV). This was Jesus' farewell; it meant He was leaving. Moreover, just before his

death, Stephen, having his eyes opened, saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Thus we can only conclude from Scripture that Jesus, as man, is now in heaven.

Yet as God, Jesus cannot be tied to a particular place, because as God He is omnipresent. Through His divine grace Christ is always present among those who believe in Him. Thus Christ, as God and as our Mediator, is also present here. "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:20 NIV).

What Is Jesus Doing in Heaven?

In Zechariah 3 we read a beautiful story about the high priest Joshua, one of Israel's leaders after the exile. He was an exceptional person but, like the rest of us, a sinner.

The prophet Zechariah was once painfully reminded of this sinfulness by a heavenly vision. He saw the high priest Joshua standing before God's throne. He was not wearing his beautiful white robe, but was dressed in filthy clothes. It seemed as if someone had picked him up out of the gutter. The vision continued and Zechariah saw the devil standing there too. (Remember how he appeared before God to accuse Job.) He now accused Joshua. "You call this a high priest? Look at his clothes! Is he worthy of his high office?" But who came to Joshua's defense? None other than the angel of the Lord. And in the Old Testament, the term "angel of the Lord" referred to the Lord Jesus. He ordered Joshua's filthy garments removed and said to him: "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you" (Zech. 3:4a NIV).

Even under the old covenant, Jesus was the protector and defender of His people in heaven. He is much more than that now. Through His redemptive work, He has denied the devil access to heaven. Satan cannot accuse God's people anymore (Luke 10:18; Rev. 12:8). He always comes to the defense of His sinful followers: "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (I John 2:1 NIV).

Our Flesh in Heaven

We find this curious phrase in the Catechism: "That we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, as the head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself." A pledge is something that someone gives you, serving as a constant reminder of the other person. It may be a wedding band. My wedding band has the name of my wife

engraved in it. The band is a pledge which always reminds me that I am married to my wife.

Similarly, Christ has taken a pledge with Him to heaven, something that always makes Him think of us. That reminder is His own human flesh, the flesh He once took upon Himself from the virgin Mary. Even after His return to heaven He remained fully human. Thus His destiny is inextricably tied to ours. He remains one of us and we remain one with Him; of this we can be eternally certain.

Counterpledge Jesus then, has taken our human nature into heaven as a pledge, and He has given us His Spirit in exchange, as a counterpledge. That Spirit represents God Himself now living in our hearts. It was Jesus Himself who sent the Spirit to earth and the Spirit signifies that we belong eternally to Jesus. We are forever bound to Him.

Do we ever think of Jesus? If so, it is because of the working of the Holy Spirit. We must ask God for that Spirit, for then Jesus will always be most important in our lives.

For Adults Luther's view of the ascension is most curious. He taught that when Jesus was born, the divine attributes, including that of omnipresence, were not only part of His divine person but also of His human nature. He said that Jesus did not use these divine attributes during the period of His humiliation, but took them up once again at His ascension. This means that even in His human nature Christ is now omnipresent. Luther applied this view in his interpretation of communion: he assumed that the real flesh and blood of Christ were actually present in the bread and wine.

We object to this because it would mean that Christ's ascension was not really an ascension at all. For in Luther's view Christ did not ascend into heaven in His human nature; He only reclaimed what He already had beforehand, and His human nature remained on earth.

As for the liberals, one of their most alarming heresies is their refusal to believe in heaven as a place. One liberal theologian, a Dr. Banning, writes in connection with heaven and hell: "We can only take these words symbolically, indicating spiritual reality." As a matter of fact, if you do not believe in the physical resurrection of Christ, you can also not believe His ascension.

Often people think of heaven as a condition

rather than a place. Think of the expression "heaven on earth." But the Bible is very clear about the creation of heaven and earth. In addition to the ascension of Christ, it also cites the ascensions of Enoch and Elijah. Presently there will also be a new heaven, because through the devil, sin was present there also.

On the Textbook

1. What was the expectation of Jesus' disciples? Why?
2. When will the Kingdom of God arrive? Where?
3. What was the greatest miracle Jesus ever performed?
4. Why did Elisha pray: "Lord, open his eyes so he may see"? What does that tell us about heaven?
5. "Heaven is the palace of our King." Can you explain what that means? Why did Jesus have to go back to heaven?
6. Jesus is God; He is also man (see L.D. 14). Where is the man Jesus now? What do the Lutherans say about that?
7. Who was "the Angel of the Lord"? What did He do for Joshua? What does that tell us about the present ministry of Jesus?
8. Christ has taken a pledge with Him to heaven. What is a pledge? How is Christ's ascension a pledge?
9. Why did Christ send us the Holy Spirit?

On the Bible

1. Read Colossians 3:1-4. Paul says, "Set your hearts on things above." Why must you do that? What does it mean?
2. In John 14:1-6 Jesus spoke words of comfort to His disciples. Why were the disciples troubled? What promise does Jesus give them? Is that a promise to us also?
3. Hebrews 6:13-20 talks about the certainty of God's promise. What does Christ's ascension have to do with that? (See especially the first part of verse 20.)
4. Can you find Bible passages that tell us about heaven?

For Discussion

1. Discuss the position of Dr. Banning, "We can only take these words (heaven and hell) symbolically, indicating spiritual reality" (see **For Adults**). If heaven and hell are not really real, then what *spiritual* meaning can they have for us?
2. Comment on the following sentence: The ascension of Jesus is the guarantee of His return.

Lord's Day XIX

Illustration:
Matthew
26:57-68

In our Catechism we read that Jesus "sitteth at the right hand of God." What does this mean?

It is a fact that Jesus brought up Himself once at a critical point in His life. He had been arrested in Gethsemane and was taken before the Sanhedrin. The Jews, filled with bitter hatred, were looking for false evidence to put Him to death. But despite their false witnesses, they could find no reason to convict Him. It was a court case that literally had no legs to stand on.

Caiaphas, the high priest, saw this clearly and decided to intervene. He wanted only one thing that night and would stop at nothing to get it: the death of Jesus. He asked Jesus a leading question. It was the question that would settle the case. "I charge you under oath by the living God: tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matt. 26:63 NIV). Now Jesus remained silent no longer. He had not responded to any previous accusations because He did not want to cooperate with their deceptions. But now He replied: "Yes, it is as you say." And then He added something: "But I say to all of you: in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64 NIV).

In the future! Jesus meant: "Something momentous is going to happen which none of you will understand. What will happen now, through My suffering and dying is decisive. I, as Son of Man, will go this way to join God at His right hand. I will sit there and share all His power. From there I will also return. And you shall see it, judges all! Think on it, because you will be held responsible for your actions!"

The judges did not listen to Jesus' warning. They condemned Him to death. They thought they could get rid of Him. But Jesus arose from the grave, ascended into heaven, and now sits at the right hand of all power, the power of Almighty God. And God gave Him all authority in heaven and on earth. Soon He will come as Judge over all, and as King of the living and the dead.

God's
Right Hand

After He returned to heaven, Jesus took His place at God's right hand. What does that mean? These human words speak of a heavenly reality.

If we used human words we might think of one of those magnificent palaces in the East, with a king on a throne. The throne is fashioned of pure gold, with room to spare. Whenever the king wants to honor someone, he invites that person to sit beside him at his right hand. Or when he discusses matters of state with his prime minister, that person is also invited to sit there with him. It is a place of great honor and power.

This will give you some idea of Jesus' ascent into heaven. God is sitting on His heavenly throne. Angels joyfully sing praises. Jesus enters, crowned with glory and honor. The Father invites Him to share His throne, because He has received all power in heaven and on earth. His place at the Father's right hand symbolizes that.

These are only human words, of course. The reality of heaven itself goes far beyond this description. It is much more beautiful and glorious than we could ever say. Even Paul caught up to Paradise in a vision, says he heard "inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell" (II Cor. 12:4 NIV).

King of the
Universe

God gave Jesus authority to rule over all things. This is beautifully illustrated in a vision given to John on the island of Patmos. In Revelation 5 we read that John saw Almighty God sitting on His throne, holding a scroll in His hand. This scroll was God's council; His plan for the world. But the scroll is sealed with seven seals. The contents cannot be read, which means that God's decrees cannot be carried out. There is something that prevents God's plans from happening. That something is sin. When sin entered the world, it seemed as though the devil's plans had triumphed over those of God.

When an angel calls out: "Who is worthy to

break the seals and open the scroll?" the question really is: Who is able to triumph over sin?

It appears that no one present can do so—not a single creature. John's eyes are drawn to another celestial being, that is first called a lion and then a lamb. One of the heavenly elders tells John that this lion, which is also a lamb, is able to open the scroll. When the elder has spoken these words, the entire host of heaven breaks into a new song, shouting with joy. They sing jubilantly that what God has planned for the world will be carried out after all.

Who is this lion, symbol of power—this lamb, symbol of gentleness? He is the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then the Lamb opens the seals. Through Him all the work God has planned will happen. He will make sure that God's plan will succeed.

Jesus does this as a lamb—that is, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He also does this as a lion, who conquers all of God's foes.

It is for this reason that He sits at God's right hand. Now He rules the whole world to the glory of God. How wonderful it is to know this despite all the problems that beset our world.

Head of the Church

Christ always thinks especially of the church, for it is here that the people of God are assembled. He will not permit that church to fall though it is assailed by Satan and the whole world. The gates of hell cannot prevail against her.

Jesus, hail! Enthroned in glory,
There forever to abide;
All the heavenly hosts adore Thee,
Seated at Thy Father's side.
There for sinners Thou art pleading,
There Thou dost our place prepare;
Ever for us interceding,
Till in glory we appear.

Christ's care for His people is illustrated clearly in the story of Stephen. Stephen was a deacon in the first church and was stoned by the Jews. The logical conclusion seems to be: Stephen is dead—the church lost. But that is not true, for when his enemies were about to kill him, Stephen "looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55 NIV). Note that Jesus at this point, was not sitting at the right hand of God. He was standing, completely supporting His faithful servant. He will soon lead this servant into His Father's house.

This is how Jesus continually abides with His church. On Pentecost He sent His Holy Spirit and through His Spirit He is present wherever two or three are gathered in His name. He prays for the needs of His people, especially the needs brought on by sin. And in God's time He will bring them all to paradise.

Christ's Return (the signs) One day Jesus will rise from His place at God's right hand, and will return. As He stands up, His angels will surround Him, to accompany Him on His journey back to earth. "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him going to heaven" (Acts 1:11 NIV).

When will this take place? "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32 NIV). The moment of His return is God's secret. Even the Son, who in His humiliation "made Himself nothing," does not know.

There have always been people who have tried to predict the moment of His return. In the year 1000, there was panic throughout Europe because people were convinced that the end of the world was near. In the nineteenth century, the Adventist William Miller predicted that Jesus would return sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844, again creating tension among many people. The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that Christ's invisible return took place in 1914.

All these calculations conflict with what Jesus Himself has said. Because we do not know when He will return, we must always be prepared. His coming will be totally unexpected, like a thief in the night. This is why Jesus compared the days immediately preceding His return to the times of Noah when no one gave any thought to God. Then suddenly—the flood! "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back" (Mark 13:35 NIV).

Nevertheless, Jesus did give certain signs, allowing the church to see that the day is coming closer (the signs of the times). On the one hand, these signs will be joyful. The Word of God will continue to spread (Rev. 6:1 and 2). The gospel will be proclaimed to all nations. How beautiful to see this happening! Today, all or parts of the Bible have been translated into 1,829 languages. The number of Bibles distributed in 1985 was 12,616,000. The number of New Testaments distributed in that same year was 12,980,659, and the number of portions (that is one or two Bible books) distributed

was 535,773,842.* Missions can now be found throughout the world, and even though there is still an urgent need for mission work, we know that the rapid expansion of the kingdom of God is one of the great signs of our times.

On the other hand, there are also many distressing signs. Jesus mentioned wars and rumors of wars; earthquakes and famines, persecutions and oppression. The Revelation of John mentions terrible natural disasters and horrifying current events. As well, at the end of time, opposition to the kingdom of God will reach its climax. The lawless one will be revealed (II Thess. 2:8), as well as the antichrist (I John 2:18), and the beast from the sea (Rev. 13:1).

We read that if these days were not "shortened" (Mark 13:30) no one would survive, not even a believer. But at that time also, Christ will preserve His people. The antichrist He will "overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming" (II Thess. 2:8 NIV).

Christ's Return (the fact) It will be a day like all others. People will eat and drink, work and sleep as usual. Suddenly, though, everyone will hear a mighty sound, like the blowing of a great trumpet. Then *all* eyes shall see Him, the Son of Man, surrounded by angels who gather to Him all the elect from all corners of the earth. Precisely how that will happen will be dealt with in Lord's Day 22.

Then the King who rules over all will take His place on His judgment seat. He will judge all men, beginning with Adam. We will be included. Can we endure the idea that even our innermost thoughts and deeds will be judged by Him? We can if we believe that Jesus Christ is our Savior. Without Him, the open pages of our life would surely condemn us and we would be lost for ever!

But there is also a book of life. All the names of God's children are written in this book, for He has selected them for glory even before they were born (predestination). Whatever God has predestined will certainly take place.

We should not think, however, that our work in this life does not count. If we have genuinely believed, the proof will be found in our deeds. The Bible tells us that faith without works is dead. Jesus should be able to say to us: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed

me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matt. 25:35 and 36 NIV).

If we live our faith in love, we need not fear the last day and the last judgment. Through faith we can echo the words of our confession of faith: "Therefore we expect that great day with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Art. 37).

For Adults Few passages of Scripture have been subjected to such imagination as the ones dealing with the return of Christ. The Adventists' belief did not die in the year 1844, even though they were disappointed. They continue to hand out their tracts on an international basis. Even orthodox evangelical groups cannot resist speculation.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are slightly different. Their speculations are mixed with other very serious doctrinal heresies, which include rejection of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ and the continued existence of the human soul.

Many North American churches believe in the millennium. This is a period of a thousand years, during which satan will be bound and Christ will reign on earth helped by believers. At the end of this reign, the world will once again be assaulted by the powers of unbelief, but then Christ will appear a second time and give His people a final victory. These ideas are based primarily on Revelation 20:1-6. Here we read that satan will be bound for a thousand years. We also read that the souls of those who were beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the Word of God, will reign.

In view of the fact that Jesus proclaimed only one return, Revelation 20:1-6 is interpreted as referring to the fact that after Jesus' ascension into heaven satan's power was curbed. Nations formerly in satan's power could now be led to the gospel. Everyone who is killed for the sake of Christ, will not perish, but will share in Christ's rule above. This rule and continuation of God's kingdom, will last a thousand years, that is to say, the number symbolizing God's designated time of perfection.

At the end of this period, satan will once again be given power over the nations (the time of the antichrist). He will be so strong that it will seem that even the church must submit to his tyranny. At that point, however, Christ will return, and conquer every form of power that ever raised its head against Him.

* Statistics obtained from the World Home Bible League for the year 1985.

On the Textbook

1. Why did Caiaphas ask his question? Why did Jesus answer him now?
2. "Something momentous is going to happen." What was that?
3. Why did the judges not listen to Jesus' warning?
4. "These human words speak of a heavenly reality." Can you describe the heavenly reality these human words speak of?
5. Who was able to break the seven seals? Why is He called both lion and lamb?
6. How does the story of Stephen illustrate Christ's care for His people?
7. Do we know when Christ will return? What is the purpose of "the signs"? (Note that there are both joyful and distressing signs.)
8. Why do we not have to be afraid when "the pages of our life" will be opened?
9. Does Jesus pay attention to our works?

On the Bible

1. In Ephesians 1:22 Paul says that God placed all things under Christ's feet, and that He appointed

Christ to be the head of everything *for the church*. What does this mean? Why is this a great comfort for the church?

2. Psalm 110:1, "The Lord says to my Lord, 'sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'" is quoted by Jesus (Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42), by Peter (Acts 2:34), and by Paul (I Cor. 15:25). Why did Jesus quote it? What was the response of the people? Why did Peter and Paul quote it?
3. Hebrews 8:1, 2 tells us that Jesus, our *High Priest*, sat down at the right hand of God. In Revelation 5 John is shown that Jesus is both *lion* and *lamb*. What is the point of both passages?

For Discussion

1. The millennial kingdom—Christ's thousand year reign—is now. Do you agree/disagree? Why?
2. We are saved by grace; we are judged by our works. How can that be? (See Matt. 25:31-46 and I Cor. 3:10-15.)
3. The more we pay attention to the signs of the times, the more we will recognize that the day of Christ's return is coming close, and the more we will pray, "Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!"

Lord's Day XX

Illustration: **Acts 2:1-13**

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His disciples to wait for the gift His Father had promised them and which Jesus had told them about. "For John baptized with water," He told them, "but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4 and 5 NIV).

What an amazing promise! Baptized with the Holy Spirit! What did it mean? Who was the Holy Spirit? Was He another Person who would descend from heaven? But how could you be baptized or immersed in Him?

The disciples handled this problem in the only way possible: they presented it to God and spent their time in prayer.

They also did something else. At Peter's suggestion, they appointed another apostle to replace Judas. The way in which they did this would seem strange to us. They first nominated two men and then cast lots. We no longer do this when we choose elders and deacons. But then, the position they had to fill was that of apostle, and the apostles had been called especially by Jesus. In this way, Matthias also was chosen by God Himself.

Ten days after the ascension, all the apostles and those whom Jesus had loved, were assembled together, perhaps in one of the buildings close to the temple. It was Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. It was also the day of the Jewish Pentecost, the feast of fulfillment or completion. At Passover the firstfruits of harvest were offered to the Lord, and on Pentecost the people offered Him loaves of wheat and remembered how He had made a covenant with them on Sinai.

But on this day of the New Testament Pentecost some very unusual things happened. Suddenly a sound, like the blowing of a violent wind, traveled through the streets of Jerusalem. But not a single leaf fluttered and all of nature remained quiet. The wind was spiritual and filled the building where the apostles and others had gathered. As these people looked at each other in amazement, they wondered what was happening. With increasing astonishment they saw that fiery tongues hovered above their heads. It was as though each person sent out a small flame. They couldn't stay seated any longer. A

mysterious power surged through them and each began to speak in ecstasy. There was no disorder. All spoke as the Spirit enabled them. Other people, hearing the sound, came to see what was happening and all who came could clearly understand what was being said. How astonished they were, for many were from other countries, that these simple disciples were able to speak to them in their own language. They heard the Word of the Lord proclaimed and extolled in their own tongue.

This had never been done before. It was a great miracle! But what did it mean? What was God trying to say? Deeply moved, many people looked at each other in wonder. Others made fun of it. There are always superficial people, quick to dismiss things, unwilling to think deeply. They mocked: "Don't you see! These people are drunk! Don't pay attention to them!"

Hearing this, Peter, profoundly moved and with great power, stood up. He called out to the crowd, proclaiming that God Himself, at that very moment, was fulfilling His promises. For God had promised to pour out His Spirit and that Spirit had now come. It was clear, he said, that the last days had begun, and the last chance for salvation before the end of the world. He called upon those listening to make the right choice. "Repent and be baptized," Peter challenged, "every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38 NIV). Three thousand people accepted his words and were baptized. The Christian church was born, and from that moment on, the Holy Spirit never abandoned His church.

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is also mentioned in the Old Testament.

For example, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson (Judges 14:20), and when Moses appointed seventy of the elders of Israel to be his assistants, the Spirit of the Lord was said to rest upon them and they began to prophesy (Num. 11:25). In the story of creation, the Spirit is also mentioned, hovering over the waters.

The Spirit existed before creation and worked

among the people of Israel. He is the third person of the divine Trinity, co-eternal with the Father and the Son. Just as the Father and the Son love the world, the Spirit also loves the world. This is why He was active in creation, why He made it beautiful and prepared it so God could dwell there. And when the world fell into sin, the Spirit began once more to make the world a beautiful place to live, a temple for God.

To accomplish this, He began in man's heart because this is where sin began. If man's heart can be cleansed of sin, the whole world can be renewed. That is why the Spirit was always active in Israel, continually offering them renewal and beauty.

In the Old Testament the Spirit's work was restricted to Israel. But when Jesus came and redeemed the world, the Spirit could also include every nation and tongue. This began on Pentecost. The Spirit signalled the beginning of this work by a violent, irrepressible wind. The flaming tongues indicated hearts burning with zeal; the multitude of languages testified to His world-conquering work.

Through the Spirit the universal church was established. The kingdom of God was making its way into the world. The earth was once again being won for God. This could never have been done by mere human beings, but only through the Holy Spirit after the sins of the world had been reconciled through Jesus Christ.

Temples of the Spirit

Sin began in the human heart. It is in the heart at birth—original sin—and there it must

also be overcome. The heart must become the dwelling place of the Spirit. People must become temples of the living God. It is this work which the Holy Spirit is continually busy with.

Regeneration

Just as the beginning of natural life is called *birth*, the beginning of spiritual life is called *rebirth*. This rebirth is the work of the Holy Spirit who lives in man's heart. "He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised; infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions" (Canons of Dort, Ch. 3 and 4, Art. 11).

The Bible tells us the parable of the sower and of

the seed that lands on the road, among the thorns, in shallow earth and, finally, on good soil. Through this parable, Jesus shows that the proclamation of the Word will have different effects, for the different places where the seed falls represent the different attitudes in people's hearts.

What is good soil? Good soil is the heart that has been prepared by the Spirit to receive the Word of God.

Repentance

According to the Canons of Dort, rebirth is accomplished within us without any contribution from us. It is a work of God, not of man. We cannot tie rebirth down to an exact hour, or describe it with precision. In the same way that we cannot recall the moment of our birth, we can also not remember the exact moment of our rebirth.

Yet we have to know whether we are born again or not, because without rebirth we cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). How can we know this? We know that a plant is alive and healthy by its leaves, flowers and fruits. Similarly, we can be sure of our regeneration when we see fruits of repentance.

The Heidelberg Catechism discusses repentance specifically in Lord's Day 33. At this point we can certainly say that repentance is a work of the Holy Spirit through which man himself becomes active. He desires to do what God wants him to do; his thoughts are constantly of God; he turns from temptations and chooses the good; he listens and obeys God's Word in his life.

Faith

When we dealt with faith earlier (Lord's Day 7), we saw that it is a gift of God. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit through which we accept the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Once the Holy Spirit has renewed a person's heart (rebirth), and once that person wants to live and walk with God (repentance), he will realize that he cannot do this on his own strength. At this point the message of the gospel will comfort him. Jesus has done all these things for him. All he has to do is simply entrust himself to this Savior (faith), for this Savior has forgiven his sins and will protect him on the way through life.

Difference Yes; Division, No Although the gifts of the Holy Spirit may differ, they cannot be separated, just as the root, stem and flower are all one plant, one entity.

The work of the Holy Spirit is a living unity. His indwelling presence in the human heart make that heart a temple of God. Once the Spirit lives there, His fruits will become evident.

Numerous Gifts of the Spirit The Spirit is very rich and distributes many gifts. He has been called the Spirit of knowledge, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of grace and the Spirit of prayer.

Through Him Holy Scripture was inspired, and He opens man's heart to its truth. He teaches us to pray and He Himself prays for us. He is the Spirit of the community, generating love in the hearts of its members. He is the Spirit of hope, pointing to the return of Jesus.

Repeatedly, the Bible sums up several of these splendid gifts of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22 we read: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (NIV).

Perseverance The Spirit is Christ's permanent gift to the church. He will never abandon His work in the world; there will always be a church (John 14:16 and 17).

The Spirit is also Christ's permanent gift to each believer. Jesus said of His own: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28 NIV).

Preserving believers, "the perseverance of the saints," is the work of the Holy Spirit. While believers, even David and Peter, are known to sin, they cannot perish. In contrast, the apostle John says of apostates: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (I John 2:19 NIV).

For this reason, the Canons of Dort rightly say: "But God, who is rich in mercy, according to His unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people even in their grievous falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death or against the Holy Spirit; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge

themselves into everlasting destruction" (Canons of Dort, Ch. 5, Art. 6).

The Sin Against the Holy Spirit

"And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven" (Matt. 12:31 NIV). These were Jesus' words to the Jews after He had healed a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. The Pharisees had sneeringly responded to this healing: "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons" (Matt. 12:24 NIV).

What did Jesus mean by "the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"? Many people have lived in terror at the thought of having committed this unpardonable sin. It has even driven some insane.

Let me state very clearly from the outset that every person whose heart yearns for the forgiveness of sins will surely be forgiven by God. Jesus did not come to frighten us or burden us with endless self-examination. He came "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10 NIV). Nor does this sin take the form of some bad thought against the Spirit, a blasphemous thought, through which the devil can torment us. After all, every sin is a sin against God, and therefore, also against God the Holy Spirit.

That is why it is important to identify the special character of this sin. That special character is made up of deliberate, unrepentant hostility against God, despite the fact that people have had the privilege to know God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The dreadful effect of this sin, influenced by the devil, is evident in people who, despite having seen God's power and goodness, continue stubbornly to resist Him. They set their minds and hearts completely contrary to God and never cease to show that they are His enemies. This sin, therefore, has taken on a demonic character, for the devil wants nothing more than to be and remain God's enemy to the bitter end.

The Jews who persistently rejected Jesus, displayed this sin against the Spirit when they attributed His works to the devil. They then sought to crucify Him through the testimony of false witnesses, denied His resurrection despite the clear witness of the soldiers, and, finally, persecuted His church to the very end.

This sin is also mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-6 and I John 5:16 and 17.

For Adults

The Election of Matthias There has been some debate as to whether the apostles were right to fill the vacancy left by Judas. Some people point out that God Himself filled the vacancy left by Judas by calling the apostle Paul, and that Matthias' election was unnecessary.

However, the Bible itself does not condemn this election. We may, therefore, conclude that the apostles acted in accordance with the will of God. We may also conclude that it was proper for the new church, beginning on Pentecost—to have twelve apostles—a number equivalent to the tribes of Israel—to carry the message of the gospel into the world.

And what about Paul? The calling of the apostle Paul can be compared to the tribe of Levi, whose special mandate included the entire nation of Israel. The tribe of Levi was also, in a certain sense, the thirteenth tribe since the tribe of Joseph had been split in two. Paul was the thirteenth apostle, whose special calling it was to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

The Covenantal Promise There has been much talk about the promise of the covenant and baptism. Why do we baptize? We baptize both because of God's command and His promise. We should ask the question however, "What is the *content* of this promise?" The word "promise" by itself says very little; it is important to know what is being promised. In Acts 2:39 we hear the promise described as follows: "The promise is for you and your children . . ." But the content of the promise is spelled out in the preceding verse: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38 NIV). With regard to this text, the content of the covenantal promise is the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We read the same thing in Acts 1:4 and 5, which records the words spoken by Christ before His ascension. Here He commands His disciples not to leave Jerusalem but to await the promise of the Father.

What promise was He speaking of? Jesus explained it in this way: "For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4 NIV). It is an undeniable fact that the New Testament covenantal promise is related to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostalism Pentecostalism has flourished during the twentieth century. A great revival movement took place in Wales between 1902 and 1905 under the leadership of a miner named Roberts. It was a movement characterized by speaking in sounds that could not be understood. This movement caught on in The Netherlands around 1908; and mid-century North America saw the beginning of a great interest in Pentecostalism.

The prominent features of Pentecostalism are the speaking in tongues and faith healing. The emphasis falls on sanctification and adherents of this movement consider it possible for a person to become so perfect in this life that he will no longer have the need to pray the fifth petition of the Lord's prayer.

It is extremely difficult to pass judgment on the speaking in tongues. In the early church, speaking in tongues was a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. When the book of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament, had been completed though, we no longer heard of it.

It sometimes seems as if Pentecostalism unnaturally tries to bring to life something that should breathe on its own. We cannot say that speaking in tongues in these meetings is a deception. Their leaders are generally reliable and far from deliberately deceptive. It is possible, under certain circumstances, for a person to become so emotionally charged, that he will utter strange and unintelligible sounds. However, the excitement necessary for this condition is often the cause of unedifying scenes. Furthermore, there is the continual danger that the main issue of faith and the preaching of the Word become less important.

On the Textbook

1. "It was also the day of the Jewish Pentecost." What did the Jews celebrate on their Pentecost? Do you see any relationship to the way in which we celebrate Pentecost?
2. What was the meaning of the violent wind?
3. Why could the people in the upstairs room of the temple not stay seated any longer?
4. What is meant by the phrase "the last days"?
5. How was the Holy Spirit active in the Old Testament?
6. How does the parable of the sower illustrate the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit?

7. What is the difference between regeneration and repentance?
8. Can you comment on the following quote: "The Spirit is also Christ's permanent gift to each believer"?
9. What is "the sin against the Holy Spirit"? In what context did Jesus talk about it? Why is it important to know "the special character" of this sin?

On the Bible

1. Read I Corinthians 12, the chapter on spiritual gifts.
 - (a) Make a list of the various gifts of the Spirit.
 - (b) To whom are these gifts given?
 - (c) Why does the Spirit give these gifts?
 - (d) Why does Paul talk about "the one body and the many parts"?
2. Leviticus 23:9-14 describes the Feast of Firstfruits. Leviticus 23:15-22 goes on to describe

the Feast of Weeks. How are these two feasts related? What is the relationship between the Feasts of Weeks and Pentecost?

3. Why is Hebrews 6:4-6 such a serious warning to regular churchgoers?

For Discussion

1. The word *charisma* means gift. Charismatics are people who put a lot of emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, especially tongue speaking, faith healing, exorcism, and prophecy. What place do these gifts have in the New Testament? What place should they have in the church today?
2. Pentecost, like Christmas, will not be repeated. Do you agree/disagree?
3. When the church yields to the spirit of the age, when an obedient walk with the Lord is not evident, when the Scripture is no longer heard as the Word of the Spirit, then Pentecostalism will stir/disturb the church.

Lord's Day XXI

Illustration:
Matthew
16:13-20

It is not surprising that in the Apostle's Creed our statement of belief in the Holy Spirit is directly followed by our confession of faith in the holy catholic church.

Whenever we think of the Holy Spirit, we think of Pentecost. Pentecost signalled the birth of the New Testament Church. And yet we do not call the Holy Spirit king of the church, nor does the Bible give Him this title; instead we see the Lord Jesus as King of the Church. Why is that? It is because the Holy Spirit was sent by Jesus (John 16:7), much like an emissary sent by a king. Jesus is King, which is why, long before the coming of the Holy Spirit, He claimed the church as His own.

He made this claim at a very important moment in His life. He had been with the disciples a long time, and they had talked much together. But did they really know who He was? Did they really believe in Him, or did they only see Him as a possible Jewish military leader who would lead them in a holy war against the Romans? Because it was a matter of utmost importance, Jesus asks them a thought-provoking question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13 NIV).

The disciples pondered for a moment, trying to recall what they had heard people say. Then they unburdened their store of information to Jesus. "Some say that you are John the Baptist returned; others believe you are Elijah, the mighty prophet escorted into heaven with fiery chariots and horses, without dying; still others think you might be Jeremiah or some other prophet." It was obvious that there was a lot of conjecture and people will talk.

Jesus then asked them directly: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15 NIV). Then Peter replied, beautifully inspired: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16 NIV).

This was a *confession of faith*, one which gave Jesus much joy. It would become the *confession of the entire church*. For this reason Jesus blessed Peter: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah" (Matt. 16:17a NIV). He continued: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18 NIV).

This was a prophecy—a prophecy that spoke of a church, a community of believers, that would soon be born and would always remain His own. Admittedly, this church would not have an easy life. The realm of death would continually assault it; a realm whose dark, perilous gates would terrify people. But although members of Christ's church would also be threatened by death, they would never perish or be lost to Jesus. You see, this church would stand firmly on a rock—the rock of faith that professes that Christ is the Son of the living God.

The Fulfillment of Christ's Promise

After His ascension, Christ fulfilled His promise by sending the Holy Spirit and by assembling His church. Many

people believed in His name and then testified to their faith. The moment they did so, death began to threaten them. The apostles were summoned before the Sanhedrin and whipped with scourges. Stephen was stoned, James beheaded. Yet despite these persecutions, the church grew; the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.

It always stayed this way. Repeatedly the church was persecuted to the death of innumerable saints. Many books have been written about the martyrs, and when we read what they suffered we may well revulse back in horror at the terrible things men do to try to destroy the church.

But the church lives on. The gates of Hades have not triumphed over her, nor will they ever succeed in doing so, for Christ Himself builds her up, as He has promised.

The Basis of the Church

Christ Himself builds on the basis which He called "this rock." Roman Catholics believe

that the word *petra* (rock) referred to Peter, and that Peter was the first pope. Subsequent popes followed Peter as head of the church. In this way, they believe that the pope is the rock of the Roman Catholic Church. We find no support for this theory

in the Bible. Nowhere does the Bible say anything about the pope of Rome. The word *petra* means "rock." If the Lord had meant Peter, He would have said Peter instead of saying "rock."

The basis of the church is the bedrock confession of the name of Christ as the Son of God. The church that adheres to this confession is the immovable church of all ages. Whenever someone genuinely confesses his faith, he always does so in the name of our Lord. This confession is the basis of the church, the basis of any of its creeds. This confession of faith in Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, must always be preserved.

A Human Basis? But is this confession based on human faith? And can this human faith, frequently so weak and small, form the basis for a lasting church?

Let's look at Peter's confession again. "This was not revealed to you by man," Jesus said to him, "but by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:17b NIV). Thus Peter's confession was not really his own. Whenever he was left to himself, he tended to act irresponsibly. This was easy to see a little later when Jesus called him "satan."

But the heavenly Father loved Peter, just as He loves all believers in the church. The church is made up of His people, chosen before the world began. Whatever happens in the world is not by chance, for God has a plan which He will carry out. From the beginning to the end of the world, God's people were born into this plan. God chose them to love and praise Him forever and He has gathered them together in the church. That is why He revealed to Peter his confession of faith in Jesus. That is also why He holds onto people who, left to themselves, would let go of Him (election). The catechism tells us that the church has been "chosen to everlasting life." In eternity we will see the entire church. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language . . ." (Rev. 7:9 NIV).

Visible-Invisible We cannot yet see the entire church. This is not only because many of its members have already died and many others will still be born; nor because all her members do not meet in one designated place; no, it is mainly because we can only see the outward actions of a person,

whereas God looks into man's heart.

We see those church members whose names are registered in the membership rolls. But God sees members whose names have been written in the Book of Life. We can never say that if a person is baptized and has made confession of faith he will automatically go to heaven. The only thing that really matters is genuine faith, and only God can see that.

"Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil-doers!'" (Matt. 7:22, 23 NIV).

Holy Are true church members people who never sin? If that were so, there would be no church members at all. If you really believe, you will believe as Peter did, that is, in Christ, the Son of the living God. Through Christ, who daily forgives your sins, you are a member of the church. This church has been sanctified by Him, and as His bride she is clothed in a beautiful white garment.

Universal Although God predestined all those who are His, His call of salvation goes out to all people without exception. No one is left out, no place is forgotten, whether it is an inner-city slum or an African tribe. Jesus calls prostitutes and tax collectors into His kingdom. That is why we speak of a universal or catholic church. If you only think of the Roman Catholic Church when you use the word "catholic," you are wrong. All those belonging to the universal church, including the Reformed, belong to a catholic body.

Divisions Within the Church But if the church does not discriminate, accepting everyone who believes, why the great divisions within the church? There are so many different denominations—Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, Mennonite, Apostolic, etc.—are they all brothers and sisters?

If that is the case, then would it not be right to support the ecumenical movement (such as the World Council of Churches), which once stated: "We praise and thank God for the power of His Holy Spirit, through which we have been brought

together and discovered that, despite our differences, we are one in Jesus Christ" (Declaration of the 1948 Conference of the World Council of Churches held in Amsterdam).

But then perhaps we should return to the old Roman Catholic Church? But people will surely object: "That is not possible! We cannot prostrate ourselves before the pope, worship Mary or attend mass!" And they are absolutely right.

This really indicates that all the different churches are not, in fact, brothers and sisters. Actually, our objections against the Roman Catholic Church are so severe that our Belgic Confession labels it a false church (Art. 29). However, this does not mean that the Roman Catholic Church does not have genuine believers among its members, or that it has lost all traces of the true church. You can compare the Roman Catholic Church to a large house that, despite its outward pomp and show, has fallen into ruin. There is so much missing, it can hardly be called a house anymore.

During the Reformation many believers tried to re-establish God's house as they read in the Bible. But that house also eventually needed so much repair, it became a hazard to its occupants. By the nineteenth century many heresies had invaded the Reformed churches. They conflicted with God's Word and led people away from Christ.

In 1835 and again in 1886 people tried to reinstate the old truths in God's house, but were not allowed to do so. For this reason, they were forced to leave and build a new church according to God's will. Here we find the roots of the Reformed churches (also in North America).

As a result of this conflict and confusion, many new churches originated, both in The Netherlands and in many other countries in the world. Some divisions can be traced to genuine and faithful resistance against heresies. Others were caused by the stubbornness and arrogance of people who would not cooperate with each other. Some churches were also established on the basis of new heresies; others again by combinations of these things.

We must remember this . . . Christ wants His church to be one (John 17:21) and we must strive for this. However, this does not mean that we must strive for unity for its own sake, because not all churches stand on the basis of Peter's confession.

We must always pray for the unity of the church, but only as the catechism states: "In the unity of true faith." On the basis of this unity we must cooperate with other churches as much as possible, trying to promote it.

The Strength of the Church

The catechism finally says that "I am and forever shall remain, a living member" of the church. What a beautiful confession! A living member!—this means that you love the Lord Jesus as Peter loved Him. A member of Christ does not merely do what society dictates without thinking about the church. Instead, he knows that the most important, the most fundamental purpose of his life is to serve the Lord in the church. This is not only something that pertains to Sunday but continues throughout the week. It's not something you talk about just in Sunday school, but always. Matthew 26:26 says: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul" (NIV). If we are living members of the church, it will be a solid support to us. We will strive with it (militant church) to overcome evil and one day it will become the church triumphant.

Jesus prayed for Peter that his faith might not fail (Luke 22:32). He also prays for us. He is our King and protects us "till we shall finally be presented without spot among the assembly of the elect in life eternal" (Form for the Baptism of Infants).

The Communion of Saints

In the church we find the communion of saints. A good comparison of this communion is found in the parable of the vine and the branches. From the stem, vines run out in all directions. Perhaps you've seen housewalls literally covered with vines! If one of the vines is cut, it retains its color and form only a while. Soon the leaves go limp and the whole vine, without its source of power, dies.

It happens to believers in the same way. As long as they have communion, through faith, with Christ, they remain alive, receiving all the spiritual nourishment they need. They will not lose hope or courage, and "can do everything through him who gives strength" (Phil. 4:13 NIV). But when communion is broken, difficulties arise. Since their source of power is gone, they can no longer handle life or death.

The communion of saints means, first of all, that the source of all power can be found only in Jesus. If this is true, believers will always be ready to help each other, for they will be reminded of what Jesus said: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40 NIV). This is something we must always keep in mind in dealing with our fellow church-members. We did not chose them, but Christ brought us together. We

may not hate or humiliate members of the church. It is horrible if a church lacks in love, because it means that the church has lost communion with Christ.

We should remember the communion of saints in our own homes; when we deal with our parents, brothers and sisters; when we go to school and deal with teachers and fellow students; when we live our lives, including Sunday, and the Lord asks us to give generously of what we have been given.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.

Forgiveness of Sins

Fortunately, the question and answer concerning the communion of saints is followed by one concerning the forgiveness of sins.

In the Bible we frequently find evidence of divisions among believers, as, for example, the quarrel between Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement and they parted company (Acts 15:39). Why? It concerned a triviality: whether Mark should accompany them on their journeys. Later the dispute was settled. Although it is clear that Paul was fond of Barnabas, there were instances of real tension between the two.

Instances like the one between Paul and Barnabas happen frequently in the church. Saints quarrel because of anger, impatience, stubbornness and foolishness. God has so much to forgive us for and forgive us He does! He does not only forgive us our sins, but also our sinful nature. Even though the believer is a vine tied to Christ, he is often also a thistle, with a tough, persistent root in the soil: his sinful nature. The truly amazing paradox about the believer is his double nature—old and new. But God continues to forgive his sins and covers his sinful nature, as long as he remains in communion with the true vine—Christ, the Son of God.

Only in Christ can we benefit from the great promise found in Isaiah 1:18: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (NIV).

On the Textbook

1. Who is the King of the church? Why He and not another?

2. Why did Jesus ask His disciples the question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Why is that such an important question?
3. Why was Jesus so happy with Peter's confession?
4. Comment on the meaning of the following quote: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Is this still true today? Why, or why not?
5. "Peter's confession was not really his own." Can you explain that? How is the Father's love revealed in our confession of faith?
6. What is the "ecumenical movement?" What does it say about the unity of the church?
7. Why is it so important to stress "the unity of true faith" when thinking and talking about the unity of the church?
8. What does it mean to be "a living member" of the church? Is that a Sunday thought, or one that carries us into the week? Explain.
9. How does the parable of the vine and the branches illustrate the communion of saints? Why is the communion of saints of such importance to Christians?
10. Why is it so good that the article about the forgiveness of sins follows that of the communion of saints? Do you experience forgiveness?

On the Bible

1. Paul addressed letters to several churches—the church in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, etc. Read the introductory verses to each of the letters to the churches, then answer the following questions. (a) How does Paul address the readers? (b) Are only the adults addressed, or does it include the children? (See, for example, Eph. 6:1 and Col. 3:20.) (c) Does Paul distinguish between the visible and invisible church? Explain.
2. Article 27 of the Belgic Confession says: "This church has been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof." What does this mean? Can you find Bible passages that will prove this point?
3. Choose one of the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2 and 3) and answer the following: (a) By what *title* does Christ introduce Himself? What does it mean? (b) How does Christ *characterize* this church? (c) What words of *encouragement*

and/or reproof does Christ speak? Why? (d) How does Christ *appeal* to this church to change? (e) What *promise* does He give? (f) What does this letter mean for the church today?

For Discussion

1. The words of answer 54 "and united in true faith" should really be dropped. They are not relevant in an age that strives for ecumenicity. Doctrine (being united in true faith) serves only to divide, while love unites. Agree/disagree?
2. Frank C. Roberts, in *To All Generations*, concludes his chapter on Zwingli and the Radicals with this observation: "In the realities of human existence, it seems, a price must be paid even to

bring truth to light. The price paid in the Reformation period was disunity and much human suffering" (p. 155). What do you think? Is there a price to be paid for obedience to the truth today?

3. C. VanderWaal, in Vol. 10 of *Search the Scriptures*, says in a footnote: "In the entryway to a number of Gothic churches (e.g., the Notre Dame of Paris and Reims and the cathedral in Strasbourg), we find depictions of the defeated and blinded *synagogue* and the shining *ekklésia* (church). The idea this conveys is that the (papal) church can *never* become a synagogue of satan. Today such thinking, which was denied by the Reformers, is again dominant. Its widespread acceptance is one of the factors hindering the application of the book of Revelation to our time. We are told that *all* churches are part of the true church" (pp. 92-93). Is that a correct observation?

Lord's Day XXII

Illustration: **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

This Lord's Day deals with *the resurrection of the body*. No one can imagine how incredibly great this miracle will be—that all the dead will rise. In order to get an idea of what it might be like, let us look at an amazing vision revealed to the old prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel lived in Babylon during the exile, at a time when it seemed that Israel, as a nation, was no more. Who can feel the despair of a country beat into submission, totally occupied by an enemy with most of the people either killed or relocated! Who can sense their hopelessness as strangers occupy their rightful place! Who can gauge the futility of their thinking they would ever return!

At this time in history, Israel, God's chosen people, appeared dead. But the Lord showed Ezekiel a vision. The hand of the Lord came upon him, transporting him to a valley filled with bones. It was a dreadful thing to look at. In every place you looked, against every hillside, lay bleached human bones. That vision summed up what had become of the people of Israel.

The Lord then gave Ezekiel a startling command. He was to speak to the bones, saying: "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 37:5 and 6 NIV).

Had Ezekiel been a skeptical person, he would probably have said: "That's ridiculous! Whoever heard of breathing life into dead bones!" But Ezekiel knew that nothing was impossible for God. So he obeyed God and began to prophesy. As he did so, a marvellous thing happened. Ezekiel heard a noise, a rattling sound. Then he saw the bones stirring. They came together, bone to bone. Then tendons and flesh began to appear on them. Then skin covered them and the whole valley was full of people, but as yet they had no breath.

Again Ezekiel was told to prophesy. He was to call breath from the four winds and it was to breathe life into these people. Again the prophet

obeyed and the people came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast nation.

Ezekiel comforted the exiled Jewish people with this vision. He told them God had said: "I will put my spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land" (Ezekiel 37:14 NIV). And this is precisely what happened, for Israel did become a nation again, taking up her role in the history of the church and the world.

What Happens at Death?

The bones Ezekiel saw were very dry. It seems that dry bones are all that is left of a person after death—and if you wait long enough, even those bones will return to dust. In spite of that, bones show only very little of what remains of man. At death, a separation takes place, a division of body and soul. The Old Testament says that the body will return to dust, just as it was at the beginning, and the soul returns to God who gave it (Eccl. 12:7). And in the New Testament, Paul writes that he yearns to leave this life in order to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23).

The most beautiful account of what happens is found in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this parable, Jesus said: "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side" (Luke 16:22 NIV).

At death, man's soul goes to eternity. The soul of the believer goes to Christ while the soul of the unbeliever goes to hell where he suffers torment (Luke 16:23 NIV).

The Resurrection of the Body

A temporary time period is called an *interim*. In this case, the interim is the time period between our life now and our life which will be. In this life we need a body. It is impossible for us to imagine our existence without this body. It belongs with us. God has created us with *a body and a soul*, and He will redeem both.

The day will come when we will receive our

bodies back again. That day will be the last day. People will be working as always. They will be busy in the fields and in the factories, unaware that it is God's time (Matt. 24:40 and 41). It will also be a time of great oppression throughout the world. The Bible tells us it will be the time of the antichrist too, and that the church of the Lord will have much to endure. Suddenly though, at a time chosen by God, disastrous signs will take place. At noon the sun will darken. On the other side of the earth the moon will not give its light. Stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then everyone will hear the shattering sound of God's trumpet, a sound like thunder, that cannot be deadened. Filled with dread people will raise their eyes upward and they will see the exalted Son of Man, Jesus Christ, appear on the clouds.

He will be surrounded by His holy angels. These angels move in all directions, for they will be sent throughout the entire world to gather the children of God and bring them to Jesus.

Rejoice in glorious hope;
 Jesus, the Judge, shall come,
 To take His servants up
 To their eternal home.
 We soon shall hear th'archangel's voice,
 The trump of God shall sound, Rejoice!

How is this possible? The great miracle that will someday take place, reminds us of Ezekiel's vision. Graves will be opened. Everywhere, even in the most unlikely places, bodies of men, women and children will be raised from the dust and from the depths of the sea. And the angels will gather and gather all the elect of God, every believer, escorting them to Jesus.

What about the living? All those who believe in Jesus will be changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye (I Cor. 15:52), and they will then, at that very moment, receive a glorified body. They will be caught up with them (the resurrected believers) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (I Thes. 4:12 NIV).

Can our hearts imagine such a meeting? Sin will be no more, nor will suffering live. "And so we will be with the Lord forever" (I Thes. 4:17 NIV).

The New Body The new body will be a real body. There are some who say that the human body, the flesh, is the source of evil. They would rather not receive another body.

However, God made man's body good; the evil is not in the body, but in his heart. It will be wonder-

ful to be given a body no longer blemished by sin. The glorified body will be a continuation and a recreation of the body we now possess. This is why the Bible compares the burial of a Christian with the sowing of a seed. "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (I Cor. 15:42-44 NIV).

What exactly is a spiritual body? It is a body that belongs completely to God's Spirit, a body that is constantly willing to love and serve God. We know that the new body will no longer have need for food and drink (I Cor. 6:13), and that there will no longer be any marriages. "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage" (Matt. 22:30 NIV). Instead, Christ "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Phil. 3:21 NIV).

Christ was born to be "our brother" (Lord's Day 14), and He will forever remain our brother.

Eternal Life The new body belongs to a new earth. Jesus talked of this new earth when He spoke of the last judgment: "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world . . .'" (Matt. 25:34 NIV). That kingdom will be the kingdom of heaven but the name does not mean that the kingdom will be limited only to heaven. No, Christ's return and judgment day "will bring about destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat" (II Peter 3:12 NIV). Possibly the nuclear threat, which is becoming very real these days, may be the means chosen by God to effect the destruction of the world. But after the destruction, a new heaven and a new earth will appear. God's children will dwell here forever and God Himself will be with them forever.

We don't know exactly what this new earth will look like. It is something no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart imagined. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah, poetically inspired almost sings to us:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
 The leopard will lie down with the goat,
 The calf and the lion and the yearling
 together;
 And a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
Their young will lie down together,
And the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the hole of the
cobra,
And the young child put his hand into the
viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy
On all my holy mountain,
For the earth will be full of the knowledge
of the Lord
As the waters cover the sea.

(Is. 11:6-0 NIV)

What a splendid description of the land we will live in—the land of peace. The New Testament tells us more. Depicting a capital city as the center of this new earth, it is painted as a breathtaking city with golden streets and pearl gates. The new earth also has the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing down the middle of the great street of the city. The bank of the river holds trees of life.

These descriptions are hindered by the fact that they are human. But even our human words render the description of what awaits us so beautifully, that we can only desire it fervently. We will forever be with the Son of Man, and God will be all in all.

For Adults

What do we believe regarding cremation? The Christian objection has mainly been that cremation had pagan origins. The idea that the body should be destroyed as soon as possible, conflicts with the biblical idea in I Corinthians 15 that the perishable body is sown to become an imperishable body. Our objection is not that the cremated body cannot be resurrected. In fact, we believe that thousands of Christians, who were burned at the stake, will be raised from the dead. The resurrection of the body is a miracle, and it is immaterial whether the body has turned to dust or to ashes. The Christian *ethic* is based on biblical example, and respect for the body in burial appears to be the norm.

Liberals reject the resurrection of the body, just as they reject the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both these things transcend human reason.

Jehovah's Witnesses deny the continuation of the human soul as well as eternal punishment in hell. Their denial is based on their interpretation of certain passages of Scripture such as: "The soul that sins shall die" and "the soul is in the blood." They explain Jesus' teachings about hell "where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" as follows: after death, worms will completely decom-

pose a body while they themselves continue to live. This conflicts with the whole interpretation of Scripture summarized by Jesus in Matthew 10:28: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (NIV).

On the Textbook

1. Why did the Lord show Ezekiel the vision of the dry bones?
2. Why was Ezekiel told to speak to the dry bones?
3. How would this vision comfort the exiled people in Babylon?
4. What happens to your body when you die? What happens to you? Will you receive your body back?
5. "Disastrous signs will take place." When? What kind of signs? Why will many people be afraid?
6. Describe "the great miracle" which is a reminder of the vision of Ezekiel.
7. How is the burial of the Christian like the sowing of a seed?
8. What do we know about "the new" heaven and earth? How are they related to the old?

On the Bible

1. Read Philippians 1:21-23. (a) If "to live" is Christ, how can "to die" be gain? (b) What does Paul mean by "to depart and be with Christ"?
2. Revelation 14:13, 14 are often quoted at a funeral. Why are the dead who "die in the Lord" blessed "*from now on*"? What does it mean, "their deeds will follow them"?
3. Retell the parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (Luke 16:19-31). Be sure you understand why Jesus told the parable. What is the point Jesus wants to make?

For Discussion

1. Cremation (see **For Adults**) is a violation of the body. It is a sin for Christians to practice it. Do you agree/disagree? Support your answer from the Scripture.

2. Discuss euthanasia. What is it? Why is it becoming more acceptable? How does it reflect a person's hope (or hopelessness) for the future life?

Lord's Day XXIII

Illustration: Acts 9:1-19

A dedicated, ambitious emissary of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin rode briskly out through the city gates to do what he thought was his duty to God and country. He was setting out to persecute the fledgling Christian church. He had already uprooted the congregation in Jerusalem, but to his consternation he discovered that these new believers were persistent. They were like weeds with strong roots thriving underground. Damascus seemed to have a new Christian community, and he was riding out to it with a vengeance.

Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, known for its heroism. He was determined to prove this true, supposing himself to be God's crusader, a just and righteous man. He was a Pharisee, knew the law inside out and was sworn to uphold it. Twice a week he fasted, and he tithed on all he possessed. He did all that was humanly possible to live to the glory of God, and therefore, never doubted that he was a righteous man.

The journey to Damascus was lengthy, but after five days of steady riding, the rooftops and steeples of the city came into view. Now he could set himself down to the task of tracking those hated Christians.

Suddenly . . . what on earth happened? It seemed like a bolt of lightning struck Saul. He was bathed in its blazing glow, and falling to the ground heard a voice above him say: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4 NIV). Totally confused, Saul blurted out: "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5a NIV). Then he heard the unforgettable answer: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts. 9:5b NIV).

Saul had presumed that he had been working for God, and now realized he had been persecuting Him instead! Thinking himself righteous, he had done the most ungodly thing imaginable. How it must have cut him to the core! Could he still be saved? But the voice of Jesus spoke again, telling him to enter the city of Damascus, where he will be told what to do.

Saul entered the city blind. The light in his eyes had been extinguished by the light from heaven. For three days and three nights he was shrouded in the dark, neither eating nor drinking.

But then there was a voice: "Brother Saul . . ." A

member of the Christian congregation that Saul had vowed to annihilate, stood beside him and called him brother! Sent by the Lord Jesus, Ananias placed his hands on Saul and promised him that he would soon be filled with the Holy Spirit. How could this be? He had not been able to do anything to make up for his sinful past. There was nothing that would make him appear just in the eyes of God!

What Saul had to learn was that this was not necessary. The astonishing news of the gospel was that righteousness could not be achieved by a person himself. No one can ever pay for his own sins. It is only through the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, given through grace, that a person can be saved.

Jesus has accomplished everything. He bore the punishment for our sins. He fulfilled the law perfectly where we could not. If we only believe what God Himself has told us, then He will count Christ's work as ours. Of ourselves we can never become righteous. We are made righteous for Christ's sake, through faith.

Who Is Righteous

Because Saul mistakenly *thought* himself righteous, he later spent much time thinking about the question of who is righteous. He came to the conclusion that no one on earth was righteous except the Lord Jesus. He wrote about this in his epistle to the Romans. As his eyes searched the huge Roman empire, he saw nothing but sinners. Rome itself was a wicked and sinful city. The capital of the then-known world was completely decadent, harboring every conceivable sin within its walls.

But Rome was no exception. The Jews, fat with knowledge and fulfilling the law, were not a hair better than the Romans. Like Saul, they imagined themselves righteous. Had they but seen themselves, however, as God saw them, they would have known different.

Thus Paul asked them directly: "You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself: You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you

commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Rom. 2:21-24 NIV).

As far as righteousness was concerned, that is, being impeccable before God, Jews, Romans, and Greeks were all the same. Thus Paul concluded: "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10 NIV).

Is the Christian Righteous in Himself?

Should we not make an exception for Christians? Could they not live in such a way as to be blameless before God? Are Roman Catholics not right in

saying that some people are saints, capable of earning eternal salvation not only for themselves but also, through their accumulation of good works, for others?

Paul looked at himself after he had been converted. As he looked, he realized that he could never be righteous in himself. On the contrary, he saw that he only added to his sin and guilt every day. In Romans 7 we read his moving confession. He points to one single commandment that opened his eyes to his sin. That commandment was: "Thou shalt not covet." How can anyone keep this commandment? Paul knew how often he coveted things that were not God's will. It just happened and Paul could not control it. We read his honest statement: "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Rom. 7:19 NIV). Accordingly, he called himself a prisoner to the law of sin at work within himself, and groaned: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24 NIV).

Anyone who examines himself honestly will come to the same realization that Paul did. There is no human being alive who can triumph over sin. There is no one in the whole world who can stand freely, righteous in himself, before God.

How Then Shall We Become Righteous?

After a careful study, Paul concluded that the whole world was held accountable to God and deserving of punishment (Rom. 3:19). But instead of

despairing, he exults: "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25 NIV).

There is no righteousness among men before God. Through Jesus, the Righteous One, man

becomes righteous. He is so rich in righteousness that He is able to pay for all of mankind. He is also our great Friend, willing to pay for the guilt of all who believe in Him. As He took all our sins, so we may take His righteousness. Whoever prays, "Oh God, be merciful to me, a sinner," will be accepted by God through grace.

The Old Testament illustrates this in a beautiful story about the high priest Joshua who lived after the Babylonian exile. He was accused by Satan before God's throne. Symbolically, his sins are represented in his clothes, not the pure white robes of a high priest, but filthy rags. In response to Satan's accusation, the angel of the Lord, the Son of God, came to Joshua's defense. He ordered festive robes to be put on the high priest, and a clean turban for his head. Despite the fact that the high priest was unrighteous in himself, he was justified by Jesus.

Is Faith a Good Work?

Certainly, faith is a good work. There is none better. "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29 NIV).

We have to remember, though, that it is not something we do ourselves, but that God works it in us. We can only be thankful to God that He has also given us this faith, and praise His name.

Our Final Conclusion

How wonderfully good our God is! How incredibly generous our Savior! All of us are like the prodigal son who began his journey with great wealth, only to squander it uselessly. He returned home with nothing to say but: "Father, I have sinned; against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (Luke 15:18 and 19 NIV). But instead the Father gave him festive garments, put a gold ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Our God is like that father. We cannot take care of ourselves, but He takes care of us. He does this for the sake of Jesus, who has accomplished all things for us.

For Adults

Justification, Sanctification, Glorification

These are three blessings we obtain from our Lord Jesus. In justification God makes us

just. We are absolved from guilt and punishment and receive eternal life.

In sanctification, God makes us holy. He lets His Holy Spirit dwell in us, restoring us in His image.

In glorification God renews us. In the resurrection of the body, we will have Christ's image.

Justification takes away the *guilt* of sin.

Sanctification takes away the *corruption* of sin.

Justification happens *all at once*.

Sanctification is an *ongoing process*.

Justification means: God works *for us*.

Sanctification means: God works *in us*.

We also speak of *phases* in justification. By this we mean that the work of God is not accidental but takes place according to a plan, begun in eternity and completed in eternity.

The first phase is called the *justification of eternity*, which means that God already knew the righteous before the creation of the world. "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified" (Rom. 8:30 NIV). The names of the righteous are written "in the Book of Life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8 NIV).

The second phase is called the *justification in the resurrection of Christ*. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25 NIV). In the resurrection of Christ it became evident that God accepted and approved the completed work of Christ.

The third phase is called the *justification through faith*. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1 NIV). The salvation purposed for us by God and accomplished by Jesus Christ, is accepted by us through our faith.

The fourth phase is called the *justification in the last judgment*. Then Christ shall say: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matt. 24:34 NIV).

On the Textbook

1. Who was Saul? How did he see himself? Why?

2. What is "the astonishing news of the gospel"?

3. Why did Paul ask the questions recorded in Romans 2:21-24?

4. Can Christians "live in such a way as to be blameless before God?" Explain your answer.

5. What convinced Paul that he was "a prisoner to the law of sin"?

6. How can you become righteous? How is that illustrated in the life of Joshua?

7. Can you explain how faith is "a good work"?

8. How are we all like the prodigal son?

On the Bible

1. **For Adults** gives six statements about justification and sanctification. Can you find Bible passages which emphasize these statements?
2. Read Romans 3:21-26. Paul talks about righteousness, law, faith, sin, justice/justify, redemption, grace, atonement and forbearance. Those are big words, loaded with meaning. Write a paragraph, in which you use these words, to explain the meaning of justification by faith.
3. Read Isaiah 55:1-9. The NIV gives this passage the heading, "Invitation to the Thirsty." What is the Lord saying here? To whom? What is *your* response?

For Discussion

1. Arminianism, and Pelagianism before it, shifts the emphasis away from God's grace to human accomplishment. However, that should not disturb us too much since Arminianism produces much better evangelists than Calvinism. Do you agree/disagree?
2. Luther's concern "How can a person be(come) righteous before God?" may have been important in the sixteenth century. Much more important, however, is the question, "How do you *live* in the world today?" How do you react?

Lord's Day XXIV

Illustration: **Luke 18:9-14**

We have recently talked about justification. Justification reminds us of justice—God's justice and judgment. One day we shall all stand before Him and nothing will be hidden from His eyes. What a wonderful feeling, to know that there will be Someone there who has paid for our sins. What a comfort to know that He who presents us to God as justified, will open the door to eternal life. That is our justification; something only Jesus can give to us. Even now, because of our faith in Him, we can rejoice in this.

There have always been people who said that they did not need justification; that they could do it on their own. They think that a best effort will satisfy God, who will respond to them by saying: "Welcome to heaven! You have done everything you were supposed to do."

Actually, that's quite a conceited attitude! In Jesus' time, there really were people who had this high opinion of themselves. They were the Pharisees. Jesus pictures one of them in His parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Two people, He said, went up to pray. Since they wanted to be as close to God as possible, they went to the temple, the house of God. The Pharisee, though, really had nothing to pray about. Praying, you see, is asking—asking God for something, and the Pharisee already had everything! He was so completely self-satisfied that he could only tell God how good he was. He said: "God, I thank you that I am not like all other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11 and 12 NIV).

In his own eyes, the Pharisee towered above the rest of mankind whom he considered to be unrighteous. Overcome by his good works, he was puffed up with self-righteousness. God had commanded Israel to fast once a year, on the great day of atonement. The Pharisee found this insufficient and fasted every Monday and Thursday. The Lord had commanded Israel to tithe their produce to Him, but again, the Pharisee did not consider this enough. He gave a tenth of *everything* he had, no matter how trifling. There was no one like him.

Surely the gates of heaven would open wide for his goodness.

The other man, the tax collector, stood somewhere in the back of the temple. He had nothing to boast about, and he beat his breast, despairing of salvation. He cried out: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13b NIV). It was very likely that his conscience bothered him. A tax collector had a bad name in Israel. He collected taxes for Rome from fellow Jews, usually extorting more than what was required. The love of God or his neighbor was a stranger to him.

Yet Jesus concluded that not the Pharisee, but the tax collector, was righteous. You see, what impressed the Pharisee about himself, did not impress God very much. Indeed, God's judgment of him was very different! But the tax collector had availed himself of God's grace, and *anyone who does that will be considered just*. We do not become righteous through our own work, but through the work of another—the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What Criterion Should We Use?

A boy once had to give a speech at the annual young people's conference. When asked if he was ready or nervous about all the people who would be listening, he shrugged, replying nonchalantly: "It'll be fine. I know it by heart." Confronted with the microphone, however, all eyes on him, he developed a bad case of stage fright. To make matters worse, in his fit of overconfidence, he had left his notes at home. What a fiasco!

It's a terrible feeling to know that you've made a fool of yourself in front of a lot of people! Still, it is much worse to appear before God unprepared. You might have thought, as the proud Pharisee did: "I've lived a good life. There was literally nothing wrong with it." Then suddenly you appear before the judgment seat of God and it turns out that nothing was right. God's criterion is not ours.

Actually, God's criterion is very simple and He has made this abundantly clear. He said: "Love me with your whole heart and love your neighbor as

yourself." Herein lies the difficulty though. Many things are possible. If you had to, you could even walk to Rome on your bare feet—but to always and under all circumstances fill your heart with love to the point where you trust God totally and love your neighbor as yourself—that is impossible. Day after day we fail miserably. Indeed, only Jesus has completely and perfectly fulfilled the law of love. How wonderful to know that God will apply Christ's work to us!

The Criterion of the Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church knows that we cannot do everything God demands of us. Hence that church also speaks of the grace of Jesus Christ.

However, Mary is placed next to Jesus. Jesus does much, but so does Mary. Jesus represents everything that God requires of us for our salvation; Mary represents everything that people can do to contribute to their own salvation. Mary is also proof that people, reaching the height of good works, can live without sin, even storing up a surplus of good works. This surplus can be accredited to others. As steward of this treasury of grace, this excess of good works, the Roman Catholic Church will share with its members. However, these good works cannot save man from eternal punishment. Here is where the work of Jesus comes in. But man can be saved from the temporal punishment of sin by drawing on his own good works or on someone else's. During the Reformation, indulgences represented an extreme example of this "credit system." Roman Catholic salesmen don't go door to door anymore, scaring people into buying, but even now indulgences can be bought from the church.

Not so long ago, there was an advertisement in the paper encouraging people to contribute toward a church. If you did, you could be sure that during the next ten years, masses would be said for the eternal welfare of your soul.

All in all, the Roman Catholic criterion cannot be found in the Bible. God asks for our hearts, and that cannot be replaced by fasting, saying the rosary, pilgrimages or monetary donations.

Wages and Reward

Does this mean that we don't have to do any good works at all? Of course not, for the Bible

mentions good works too often for us to simply dismiss them with a shrug. "In the same way, let

your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in Heaven" (Matt. 5:16 NIV). The Bible even teaches that God will remember those good works in eternity. Jesus said that the reward of those persecuted for His sake will be great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:12). And when He spoke of the last judgment, He emphasized the fact that our good works would be taken into account. It is then that God will remember whether we have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty and helped the suffering in His name. There is no faith where this message is held in disregard, for faith without works, according to James 2:26, is dead.

But the question is whether these works can *justify* us, whether these works will give us forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This is not taught in the Bible. Even our best works "are all imperfect and defiled with sin," when measured against the perfect criterion set by God. In fact, the good works we perform do not come from ourselves but only through the Holy Spirit who motivates our hearts.

Can we ever say that we have earned salvation, as one earns wages? No, God's acceptance of our good works *is not payment but reward*.

A Dangerous Teaching?

Roman Catholics have often accused churches of the Reformation of teaching a doctrine that belittles and depreciates good works. It is true that there have been people who completely dismiss good works. They were there during Paul's ministry, and Paul must have had them in mind when he asked: "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" (Rom. 6:1 NIV).

Even then, there were so-called antinomians, people who held that faith alone, not obedience to the moral law, gave salvation. In effect they said: "The more you sin, the more you can benefit from grace. In fact, sinning is actually to God's glory, because when you sin, grace abounds."

Paul completely dismissed this viewpoint. "By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Rom. 6:2 NIV). We must, of course, agree with him. Whoever genuinely believes, loves Jesus, and whoever loves Jesus cannot take pleasure in sin. Anyone who takes pleasure in sin or treats it lightly, only proves that his faith is misguided and not real.

The teaching of justification through faith is not a threat to good works. On the contrary, it creates thankful people, anxious to do what God wants

them to do.

In the year 1560, the Cardinal of Lorraine declared that he considered the ministers of Calvin's Geneva inferior. The French Field Marshall, de Montmorency, replied that indeed many people had tried to tarnish the image of Geneva, but that he considered it an example to other cities. "Even if I can give you no other witness than that of soldiers . . . passing through Geneva on their return from Rome, with all its papist trappings, they had the impression that they had just left hell and entered a small paradise."

For Adults Many people have seen a contrast between Paul and James on the subject of justification.

In Romans 3:28 Paul writes: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (NIV). In James 2:24, the apostle James writes: "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (NIV).

The two passages seem contradictory, and one might even be tempted to depict Paul as Reformed and James as Roman Catholic.

But the contradiction is only apparent. What did Paul mean when he wrote that we can be justified without the law? He simply meant that we can never present a perfect work before God by which we might be saved. There is only one perfect accomplishment, namely, the work of Jesus Christ.

James did not differ; he spoke of the forgiveness of sins in response to a believer's prayer (5:15). But he had come into contact with people who only *claimed* to have true faith (2:14). Their faith went no farther than their words, and they did not act on what they said. When someone in need came to them, they did not help. They only gave words like: "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed" (James 2:16a NIV). To these people faith was a theory, something you could talk about. James warned them that even the demons believe in God—and shudder.

James came to the very right conclusion that genuine faith will translate into good works. After all, faith and good works involve the entire being, not just the logical mind. James emphasized that we are justified only through faith, but that faith is proved in deeds of love; those works must surface if we genuinely love Jesus Christ.

Paul points out that not a single human good work can make us righteous before God.

On the Textbook

1. How does justification "remind us of justice"?
2. Why is the attitude of those who think that their "best effort will satisfy God" really a conceited attitude?
3. Why did the Pharisee really have nothing to pray about?
4. Why did Jesus say that the tax collector was justified?
5. Why is God's "simple criterion" really very difficult? Is there anyone who can do what God asks?
6. What does the Roman Catholic Church teach about good works? Is it possible to have a surplus of good works? What are indulgences?
7. Are we required to do good works? Why, in effect, do we do them?
8. Why did the Roman Catholics accuse the churches of the Reformation of holding to "a dangerous teaching"? Was there reason for their concern?

On the Bible

1. Read I Corinthians 3:10-15. What does this passage say about the way we are saved? Are our works important? What is the place of our works?
2. Read John 15:1-8. Tell what each of the following does, and why: (a) the vine; (b) the gardener; (c) the branches. How does this passage show us that the teaching of the Reformation Church will not make people indifferent and wicked?
3. Read Psalm 73. Why is Asaph so upset? Was there reason for him to be upset? What is the realization he comes to? What does this tell us about the reward for good works?

For Discussion

1. May a Christian work for his reward? Be sure to give Scriptural support for your position.
2. We are saved by faith, the gift of God's grace, apart from the works of the law (Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8, 9). Our works, however, are judged and rewarded by God (I Cor. 3:10-15; John 15:2, 6; Rev. 14:13). How can both be true?