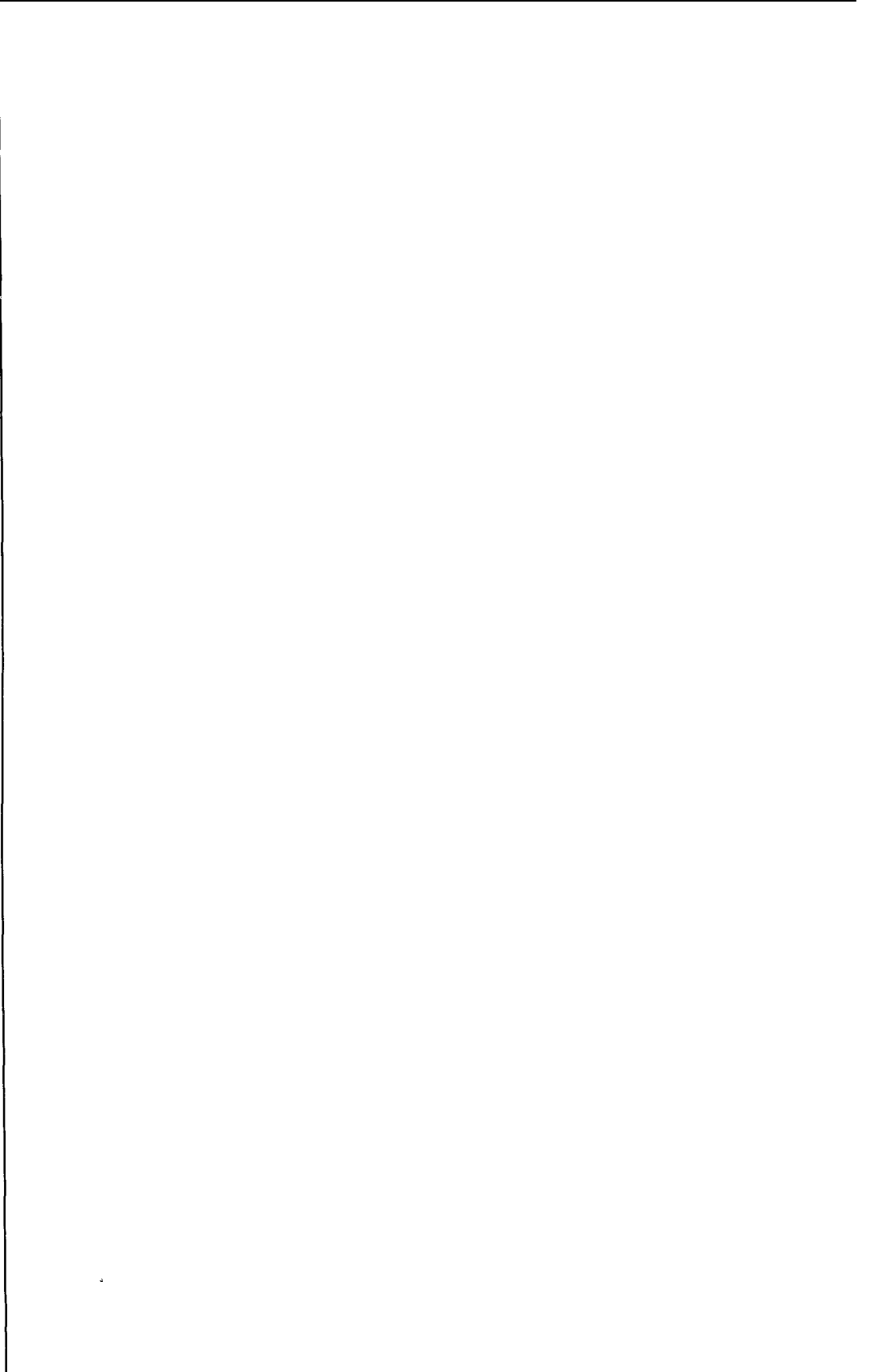


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Before the Face of God



Louis Praamsma

Before the Face of God

*A Study of the
Heidelberg Catechism
Lord's Day 25-52*

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Lord's Day XXV

Illustration: We will now begin to discuss the sacraments. This is a very important topic, so important in fact, that the catechism devotes no less than seven Lord's Days to it. We should, therefore, study the sacraments carefully.

Judges 6:11-24 and 33-40

Some Christians would prefer to do without sacraments altogether. The Salvation Army, for example, which in many ways deserves our respect, does not consider the sacraments necessary. They feel that there has been so much disagreement and conflict concerning them, that it's better to leave them out. However, this is a great mistake and a serious flaw in their reasoning. There have been conflicts in the church with regard to many issues. The problem does not lie with any particular issue, but with the sinful people dealing with each particular issue—people, whose shortsightedness, arrogance and prejudice, often spoil the good gifts of God.

We need the sacraments God gave us and must honor them. Why do we need them? Let's look back at the story of Gideon, a brave man, a hero of faith, who lived during a time when Israel was in sore distress. They had abandoned God, and as punishment He had given them over to the Midianites. These Midianites ravaged the land, coming up with their livestock and tents like swarms of locusts. The Israelites despaired and cried out to the Lord.

Then God graciously granted deliverance. The angel of the Lord, (the Son of God in the Old Testament), sought out a farmer's young son by the name of Gideon. The angel addressed Gideon as "mighty warrior" and called upon him to save Israel. But Gideon felt very unsure. Israel was crawling with Midianites and what could one man do? Besides, if he didn't thresh and hide his grain now, the Midianites would carry off his crop. Finally Gideon said: "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me" (Judges 6:17 NIV).

Gideon needed a *sign* from God, some visible indication that would show him that God's message was really true. So God gave him a sign because his

question was prompted, not by doubt, as was the case much later with Zacharias, John the Baptist's father, but by faith that needed help. He was told to place some meat and bread on a rock. The angel of the Lord then touched the food with the tip of his staff. Fire flared from the rock, consuming both the meat and the bread.

Later, Gideon needed a sign again. Having gathered some of Israel's tribes, he was getting ready to attack. Even though Gideon trusted God, he was still afraid. So he asked the Lord to strengthen his faltering faith by giving him another sign. He placed a woolen fleece on the threshing floor and asked God not to send any dew that night—usually there was a heavy dew—and yet to make the fleece wet. Gideon received his sign. The next morning the fleece was wet but the ground was dry. He again asked God for a sign—but this time he requested the opposite. Again he placed the fleece on the threshing floor and, lo and behold, the next morning the ground was covered with dew but the fleece was bone dry. At this point, Gideon was satisfied. Armed with the power of the Lord, he proceeded to defeat Israel's enemies.

The Need for a Sign

People need signs. Our most important senses are *hearing and seeing*. At school we not only hear the teacher, but we also see what is written on the blackboard. What we *see* reinforces our understanding and enables us to remember better. It is easier for a child to learn from a book that is illustrated, than from one that has no pictures.

Similarly, we need signs; signs that will show us something of our invisible God; signs that will remind us of His faithfulness. Even in Paradise, the Lord taught through signs: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. And after the flood, God sent the rainbow. When we see the rainbow, we know that God will remember the covenant He made with all living things. Signs are a great gift from God that help us to see His presence

in the world.

He has also given His church certain signs. Those signs are the sacraments. Through the sacraments God wants to visibly reassure us of His faithfulness to His covenant.

Word and Sacrament

Is it not enough to have God speak to us through the Word?

It is true that the Word is most important. No one has ever been saved merely because he was baptized or attended the Lord's Supper. When missionaries go out into the world, they *proclaim the gospel*. They baptize only if the gospel is believed. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17 NIV). This order cannot be reversed.

The Roman Catholic Church, however, has substituted the sacrament for God's Word. In a Roman Catholic Church, the audience faces the altar, not the pulpit. The main goal of Roman Catholic missionaries is to baptize people even when they do not, as yet, consciously believe. Thus the Roman Catholic Church overestimates the importance of the sacrament and reverses the order. In reality, the Word comes first, as faith comes from hearing the Word. The sacraments, which reinforce that faith, come after this.

The Means of Grace

Both Word and sacrament are *means* of grace; that is, they do not stand independently, but

are to be used. Neither the Word nor the sacrament works automatically. When a person believes, this is not the work of the Word or sacrament, but the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit uses the Word as means to give faith. The same Holy Spirit reinforces that faith again using the Word and also the sacrament as *means*.

Therefore, we cannot expect our salvation to come by these means, but we must pray for the Holy Spirit. But we should not belittle these means either, ignoring the administration of Word and sacrament, for then we would be like people who want to get better without a doctor's medicine.

What are Sacraments?

The word "sacrament" does not appear in the Bible. Derived from Latin, it could mean

a vow of allegiance that Roman soldiers took in the

name of their god(s). Generally speaking, it had a sacred and, more or less, mysterious meaning.

The church kept this word, which is permissible, as long as we know what we mean when we use it. When we use the word "sacrament," we refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Romans 4:11 speaks of *the signs and seals of the covenant of grace*.

Signs are visible symbols of something we cannot see, such as a wedding ring, the national flag or a beckoning hand. Seals are affirmations of a promise, such as the seal on a contract, or the shaking of hands to close a deal.

Both of the sacraments are *signs of the Lord Jesus*. His blood, which purifies from sin, is signified in the water of baptism. His broken body and shed blood are signified in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

Both sacraments are also *seals of the Holy Spirit*. Through the sacraments, the Holy Spirit assures us that the promises of the gospel are true, also for us.

How Many Sacraments?

God gave Israel two sacraments in Old Testament times, circumcision and Passover. The

New Testament is richer. Circumcision was only for small boys. Baptism, which replaces circumcision, is also for girls. The Passover pointed to the blood of a lamb and to the exodus out of Egypt. The Lord's Supper, which took the place of Passover, points to the blood of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of all sin.

Both New Testament sacraments were instituted by Christ Himself. He instituted baptism when He said: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19 NIV). He instituted the Lord's Supper when He said: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19b NIV).

The Roman Catholic Church has seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, communion, confession, ordination, marriage, and extreme unction. The entire life of a Roman Catholic is surrounded by sacraments, but not all of them were instituted by Christ. Moreover, some of these sacraments are not visible *signs* nor can all of them be found in the Old Testament.

For Adults

There are three different views of sacrament.

Firstly, there is the Roman Catholic or mystical view. This aspect attributes a mysterious or mystical effect to the sacrament, irrespective of whether the person receiving the sacrament believes. Roman Catholics see the sacrament as a container filled with grace, which the church pours out into the soul of the recipient. Personal faith is not necessary, but the person receiving the sacrament is requested not to raise any problems whereby the reception of the sacrament might be hindered. The grace of the sacraments is presented on a platter as the real body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation). Even church mice and rats, who somehow nibble their way into church, in effect eat of the body of Christ.

Secondly, there is Zwingli's *symbolic* view. He emphasized the visible signs and partaker's remembrance of Christ. He did not, however, pay any attention to the sealing work of the Holy Spirit, nor to the action which flows from Christ whenever the sacrament is administered.

The Reformed position is the *scriptural* one. It recognizes both the work of the Holy Spirit and the faith present in the person partaking of the sacrament. The believer must receive the sacrament prayerfully in obedience to the command of Christ. The Holy Spirit will then use this sacrament to reassure the believer of the truth of the promises found in the gospel.

The founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, discontinued the sacraments because they were the cause of much disagreement. Booth recognized only one baptism—baptism by the Holy Spirit. Instead of baptizing their children, members of the Salvation Army consecrate their children to God. As far as communion is concerned, Booth declared: "We teach our soldiers to remember our Lord continually: when they eat bread, they are to think of His broken body—when they drink from a cup, they must think of His shed blood—when they wash their bodies, they should remember that the soul can only be made pure by the cleansing blood of Christ."

The Salvation Army not only takes a very one-sided approach, but it also willfully disobeys the Scriptures.

On the Textbook

1. Why did Gideon need a sign?
2. Was it wrong for him to ask God for a sign?

3. To what did the signs point—to the faith of Gideon?
4. Does God use the sacraments to create faith?
5. How does the Roman Catholic Church think about the sacraments?
6. Where can we count on the Spirit being present, and doing His work?
7. How many sacraments does the Roman Catholic Church have? Why do we have just two?
8. Can you find the places in the New Testament where Jesus teaches us about the sacraments?
9. Which Old Testament sacrament points ahead to baptism? to the Lord's Supper?
10. What is a covenant?
11. Why are the sacraments called "holy"?—"signs"?—"seals"?

On the Bible

1. Read Genesis 17:1-15. Who began the covenant relationship? How? Is it important to know who began the covenant? Why? What promises were made in this covenant? What did God ask from Abraham? How did the sacrament of circumcision make God's promises clear? How did it seal them? How did it show the threat of covenant punishment for disobedience?
2. Read Joshua 5:2-12. Where were the Israelites at this time? Why do you think that God wanted them to be circumcised at this time? What else did they do at Gilgal? Why do you think there is so much history included in the account of the circumcision? What happened "on the morrow after the Passover"? Why did the author include this detail? What does this passage say about Israel and her obedience? What does it say about God's faithfulness?

For Discussion

1. If there is so much fighting about the sacraments, why not just stop using them? After all, the Word is more important anyway, isn't it?
2. Do you, at your age, participate in the sacraments? What do they mean to you? How does baptism help you understand and believe God's gospel promise? What about the Lord's Supper?

Lord's Day XXVI

Illustration: A man stood on the banks of the river Jordan. The sun glowed with joy, the river banks teemed with growth, and the clear water rushed by. But no one saw any of this. The people gathered at the riverside were spellbound as they listened to the prophet whose eyes seemed to penetrate through to their very soul.

He wore clothes made of camel's hair, reminding the crowd vaguely of what they thought Elijah must have looked like. His voice was commanding, convincing as he cried: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt. 3:2 NIV). He preached the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins.

Pharisees and Sadducees were among his listeners, strict about obeying the letter of the law, yet lacking in real love. He did not hesitate to call them "a brood of vipers." He told them God was giving them one more chance, but that "the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3:10 NIV).

The people wanted to know what the fruits of repentance were, and John told them. "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same (Luke 3:11 NIV). He told the tax collectors: "Don't collect any more than you are required to" (Luke 3:13 NIV). He told soldiers: "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay" (Luke 3:14 NIV).

Many in the audience were so deeply moved by John's message, that they confessed their sins and let him baptize them in the river Jordan. He totally immersed them in the water to show that God wanted to wash their sins away. They emerged from the river as people with whom God had made a new covenant. In this covenant, God forgave their sins and they promised God that they would turn away from sin.

The Baptism of John John's baptism is the first the Bible mentions. Prior to this, the Jews did have a form of baptism for proselytes (persons converted to Judaism from another race). The Jews believed that, as children of Abraham, they were much better than the heathens. If one of them was converted, his pagan corruption first had to be washed away in a "proselyte baptism."

The remarkable, penetrating quality about John's baptism can be summed up in this way: "In reality, you Jews are not any better than the heathen nations. Without complete repentance your being Jewish doesn't mean a thing!"

The people intuitively felt that he was right. They crowded around him, eager to participate in the message of repentance and forgiveness—a message they had not heard anywhere else. God was willing to forgive their sins.

The Baptism of Jesus Among all these people, Jesus moved about also. He too came forward to be baptized by John. That was so difficult to understand that we can well imagine John's reluctance when he said to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14 NIV). But Jesus replied: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:14 NIV).

John then immersed Jesus in the river Jordan. The heavenly Father sanctioned this. The heavens opened; the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove; a voice was heard from heaven: "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17 NIV).

What did the baptism of Jesus mean? It did not mean that His sins had to be washed away, but it did show that He totally took our place and accepted our sins on His shoulders. Burdened with those sins, He descended into the waters of the river Jordan as one going down into the grave. But without those sins, triumphant over them, He rose from the river, symbolic of death. Thus, even in

baptism He was our Mediator. His baptism signified what He would later fulfill through His death, descent into the grave, and resurrection.

Jesus' Baptism Jesus agreed with the baptism of John. He also started baptizing in the river Jordan, "though in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but His disciples" (John 4:2 NIV). This proved that He was more than John; He was the Lord of baptism.

After His resurrection this Lordship would be manifest in every way. He then gave His disciples the *baptismal command*: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19 NIV). It was therefore, Jesus' direct *command* that all nations should be baptized. This is why no one should say that faith is the only thing that counts, and baptism is not that important. Whenever Jesus commands something, it is always important; and we may not ignore it.

He also specified that people should be baptized *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, that is, in the name of God according to the fullest revelation of Himself to us (compare the beginning of the liturgical form for infant baptism). Through baptism the person is brought into the closest contact possible with God. From then on, even though a sinner, that person may live in communion with God. The water indicates that all unworthiness, all sin, has been taken away.

The Promises of Jesus This forgiveness was clearly promised by Jesus when He said: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16 NIV). Here we see that believing is immediately followed by baptism. They belong together like a soldier and a uniform, or a graduate with a diploma. The diploma proves he has successfully completed his exams. Similarly, baptism is not faith, only its sign. And as often as the sign is seen, there is also the promise: it is true, it has been pledged, and it will happen.

Sign and Seal In the previous Lord's Day we saw that the sacraments are signs and seals. But what is the sign of baptism? That sign, or symbol, is the water. Throughout the world water is used to wash away dirt. A conscientious

homemaker always needs a lot of water.

The worst filth possible is that brought on by sin. Sin is like a dense cloud of tiny particles that penetrates everything, including the deepest corners of the heart. The water of baptism signifies that this sin has been washed away. How? "The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from every sin" (I John 1:7 NIV). Thus the water of baptism is *the sign of the blood of Jesus*.

What is the seal of baptism? The seal, or affirmation, is found in what Christ says to us through the water. "I am washed with His blood and Spirit from the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as certainly as I am washed outwardly with water."

Through the sacrament of baptism Christ speaks to the one being baptized in the same way that a man speaks to a woman when he gives her a wedding ring. "I promise to be faithful. Remember that as often as you look at that ring. I will do the same."

Blood and Spirit

The catechism speaks of being washed through the blood *and the Spirit of Christ*. Why this separate mention of the Spirit? It is because we do not only need close communion with the forgiveness of Christ's blood, but we also need contact with the renewing Holy Spirit.

Let's consider a mother who washes her children. After the children are clean, they can do one of two things: get dirty again as quickly as possible, or try to stay clean. No doubt the mother would like them to stay clean. In the same way, the Lord Jesus does not mean baptized people to say only: "Our sins have been forgiven!", but He also wants them to fight against sin. It is for this reason that He promises to give them the power of the Holy Spirit when they are baptized.

Baptism by immersion was vividly symbolical in that it represented descent into the grave and resurrection to a new life. "We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Rom. 6:4 NIV).

Immersion or Sprinkling?

Is it not more biblically accurate then, to baptize by immersion? This has become a hallmark of the Baptist church. They immerse adults in a large baptismal font generally placed

near the pulpit at the front of the church. They also, at times, use rivers or lakes.

Admittedly, immersion is a much more lifelike representation of baptism than sprinkling, particularly because it stands for death and resurrection. But the Baptists go too far when they make immersion an essential and indispensable symbol, dismissing sprinkling as worthless.

In the early church there was probably baptism by sprinkling already. It is highly unlikely that the three thousand baptized on Pentecost were all taken to a river to be immersed. In addition, the Bible several times mentions the term "sprinkled blood" (Heb. 12:24; I Peter 1:2; Ezek. 36:25). More importantly, though, we should not place too much emphasis on the quantity of water or on the manner by which it is administered. Much more important is what baptism signifies—the reconciling blood of Christ that purifies from all sin.

Over time, baptism by sprinkling became a general custom in the church. This was partly because it was difficult to immerse small children in water; partly because large quantities of water were not always available for total immersion; and partly because the climate was not always suitable for immersion.

For Adults

Baptism and the Unity of the Church

The Bible places baptism in close relationship with the unity of the body of Christ. "For we were baptized by one Spirit into one body" (I Cor. 12:13 NIV). Whoever becomes a mem-

ber of the church proves his intentions by letting himself be baptized. Baptism is the seal of authenticity, both from God's side and from the side of the baptized person. This is why we call baptism the sacrament of incorporation into the church.

This incorporation into the church takes place only once. It is not possible to become incorporated into the body of Christ more than once. That is why Christian sister churches will recognize each other's baptisms. This recognition bears testimony to a tie that exists between those churches despite differences.

Our churches do not recognize a baptism that is not administered in the name of the triune God. Generally speaking, we recognize all baptisms, whether administered to children or adults, that have been administered in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism, the Flood and the Crossing of the Red Sea

The baptismal prayer reminds us of how Noah and his family were saved and protected in the ark. It also lets us remember how Israel was led through the middle of the Red Sea on dry ground. The Old Testament examples are mentioned because the New Testament itself, when speaking of baptism, mentions these events (I Peter 3:21; I Cor. 10:1 and 2). It is also because in both cases water created a division between the world and the church. This same division is still indicated by the water of baptism.

On the Textbook

1. Who prophesied about the coming of John the Baptist?
2. How did John tell the people to show that they were really sorry for their sin?
3. How could John use such a terrible name ("brood of vipers") for God's chosen people?
4. What "kind of baptism" did John preach?
5. Considering what the Jews used baptism for, how do you think they reacted at first to John's call to be baptized?
6. If John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, why did Jesus have to be baptized?
7. Is it important that Jesus' baptism took place before His ministry began?
8. Did Jesus have John's baptism in mind in Matthew 28:19ff? (Check Acts 19:3-5.)
9. Do you know what it means to live in communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
10. Why is water such a good sign to use in baptism?
11. Why does the catechism speak of both Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit?
12. Of what is immersion a picture? Is it better than sprinkling?

On the Bible

1. Read Romans 6:1-11. What does verse 3—"All who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into His death"—mean? (Check vs. 5ff.) Read verses 4 and 11 again. Once you have been baptized, what does God expect of you? "Con-

sider yourselves dead to sin”—are you dead to sin? What does this mean? If we are “no longer enslaved to sin,” do we still sin? What then? Doesn’t verse 7 teach that baptized people no longer sin? What does your baptism say to you if you do sin?

2. Read Matthew 28:6-20. When did this happen in terms of Jesus’ life and ministry on earth? Why is that important? What are Jesus’ first words to His disciples? How did Jesus earn “all authority in heaven and on earth”? Beside baptizing people of all nations, what are the disciples commanded to do? Check John 14:15, 21, 23. Why must the disciples teach believers to observe all that Christ commanded them? What are Jesus’ last words? How was this promise fulfilled, and how is it being fulfilled today?

For Discussion

1. What do you think it means to “use your baptism”? How do we fail to use our baptism? What are some wrong ideas about the relationship between baptism and salvation?
2. Is the Holy Spirit really at work in you? How do you know? What does it mean to “grieve the Holy Spirit”? (Ephesians 4:30).

Lord's Day XXVII

Illustration: Do you remember the story of **Exodus 4:24-25** Moses, the baby hidden in a basket among the Nile's reeds?

Do you recall how he grew up as an Egyptian prince, but chose to remain a Jew, although his people were severely oppressed? Do you recollect how he was forced to flee to a strange land after he had killed an Egyptian? There are many stories about Moses' life, but the one we are about to discuss is rather strange. It took place at a lodging place between Midian and Egypt.

Moses, as you remember, had fled to Midian and had married there. His wife's name was Zipporah, and they had two children, Gershon and Eliezer.

After Moses had lived in Midian for many years, the Lord appeared to him in a burning bush and commanded him to return to Israel. Because it was a long trip, Moses and his family stayed at a lodging place. But then something odd happened. Moses suddenly became dangerously ill. It appeared as if he was going to die. Now that can happen to anyone, but in the case of Moses it was most peculiar because God had given him a special task. If Moses were to die, how could the task be carried out? Why would God, the Lord of life and death, wish him dead.

We don't know what Moses thought about this. He may well have been unconscious. His wife Zipporah, however, gave it a great deal of thought and came to the conclusion that her conscience was not clear. She had married a man who knew the Lord; a man who wanted to live in complete obedience to the Lord. He had wanted to have his children circumcised on the eighth day, according to the law given to his forefather Abraham. For had not God commanded Abraham: "For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, . . . Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Gen. 17:12 and 14 NIV).

When Gershon was born, Moses had observed that law, but Zipporah had found it most distasteful. Circumcision required that the foreskin be cut off. The small baby bled and cried. Zipporah

could not understand why it had to be done. She did not realize that through circumcision God established a covenant with the child, forgiving that child's sins.

Zipporah was much more concerned about the external aspects of circumcision, and when Eliezer came along she probably said to Moses: "I don't want you to do that again. Circumcision is too much of a shock for a small child." In Numbers 12 we read that Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth. It is an enviable virtue, but it can also be a very dangerous one if it allows you to do things that are contrary to the Lord's will. Because he loved his wife, Moses agreed and had swayed for her arguments, and consequently, little Eliezer was not circumcised.

At this point, with Moses deathly ill, Zipporah's conscience accused her. She clearly saw what was wrong. Her husband had been told to go to Egypt to liberate his people. How could he go as someone who himself had broken the covenant with God. The Israelites would only say to him: "Physician, heal thyself!" Zipporah realized that she had to choose between Moses and God on the one hand and Moses' death on the other. She made her decision. She took a flint knife and circumcised Eliezer. It created a tumult of conflicting feelings inside her for she said to Moses: "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" (Ex. 4:25 NIV).

Zipporah understood what the Lord wanted, for Moses did not stay in peril of his life. He lived and presently took his family, a family which shared in God's covenant, to Egypt to set his people free.

Children Also in the Covenant

If ever there was proof needed that children belong to the covenant with God, and that the Lord wants them to have the sign of the covenant, it surely must be this story. According to the law, all young male infants *had to be circumcised* on the eighth day. If that did not occur, it was counted as a great sin. Circumcision

was a sign that Israel and *all its generations* were the people of God. All those outside of the nation of God were referred to as "the uncircumcised," the heathen. It was an expression of contempt and Israelites were forbidden to live as heathens. God had made His covenant with the *entire* nation, including the children.

Baptism in Place of Circumcision

The New Testament church discontinued the practice of circumcision. When Jewish Christians in the early church insisted

on maintaining circumcision, the first church council was called to tell them otherwise (Acts 15:1).

Circumcision was no longer necessary, for Christ had instituted baptism. Baptism was the New Testament sign of the covenant, taking the place of circumcision. Paul deals with this transition from circumcision to baptism in Colossians 2:11 and 12: "In Him you were also circumcised, in putting off the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with Him in Baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead" (NIV). In these words Paul tells the Colossian Gentiles, who were not circumcised in the flesh, that in reality they were circumcised by Christ. When did that happen? The circumcision of Christ took place when they were baptized, for at that moment they were buried and raised with Him. That is the true circumcision.

If baptism really came in the place of circumcision, then children again share in this. The New Testament is not less generous than the Old Testament where children are concerned, but much richer, also in the sense that baby girls were to be baptized.

In the Old Testament, females did belong to the covenant, but they did not receive the sign and seal of incorporation. That was part of the curse under the law. But when Christ came, He redeemed all from the curse of the law: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27 and 28 NIV).

Jesus and the Children

Jesus loved the children of His people and He still loves the children of the church. The disciples did not understand this; they thought that

Jesus was much too important and far too busy to be bothered with small children. When a number of mothers brought their children to Jesus, the disciples admonished them. But Jesus, although He was always patient with His disciples, upbraided them for this. They hampered Him in His work, which is also *for children*.

He spoke words which are surely very familiar to us: "Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14 NIV). He then "took the children in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:16 NIV). The kingdom of God also belongs to children.

Does this apply to all children? There was a day when Jesus traveled *outside of Israel*, that a Gentile mother appealed to Him on behalf of her daughter. This took place in the region of Tyre, and the mother asked Him to cast out a demon from her daughter. Although one would have expected Jesus to help a child with such horrible problems immediately, He did not. He did *not* respond as we might have thought He would by saying, "I'll open the door to the kingdom of God and all its blessings right away for this child." Instead He said: "First, let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (Mark 7:27 NIV).

Why these seemingly cruel words? Well, Jesus was first of all obedient to His Father. And because His Father had drawn a clear line between those who were His people and those who were not, between the people of the covenant, including the children, and those outside of the covenant, Jesus could not do otherwise. But when the mother demonstrated her faith in Jesus, accepting God's covenant through this faith, her child also received the covenant's blessing. Jesus healed the child. Through her mother's faith she received Jesus' blessing.

The Covenant of Grace

We often sing, when a child is baptized:

Thus saith the mercy of the Lord:
"I'll be a God to thee;
I'll bless thy numerous race, and they
Shall be a seed to Me."
Abram believed the promised grace
And gave his child to God,
But water seals the blessing now
That once was sealed with blood.

Jesus the ancient faith confirms,
To our forefathers given;
He takes young children to His arms,
And calls them heirs of heaven.

The covenant means that things are right between God and us, but only for Christ's sake. It means that God promises the salvation obtained by Jesus also to the children of believing parents.

We have seen how important the Lord held the keeping of that covenant in the Old Testament and how in the New Testament Jesus very much desired contact with children of the covenant. When Peter invited the Jews to become members of the church at Pentecost, and asked them to be baptized, he immediately included the children in the promise: "The promise is for you and your children" (Acts 2:39 NIV).

The children of the church also belong to the covenant of grace. This means that God promises to be their God and that "the Holy Spirit, the Author of faith, through the blood of Christ is promised to them no less than to adults." Hence children may and must be baptized.

What Does Infant Baptism Say to Our Children?

Infant baptism tells our children that they belong to the people of God. By natural law this should not be so, for, like all children, they have been

conceived and born in sin. They are members only because their parents belong to the people of God and because the Lord has promised these parents that the redemption of the Lord Jesus Christ also applies to their children. Infant baptism says and always continues to say that all children have been defiled by sin since the beginning, but they are washed through the blood and the spirit of Christ, from birth.

The greatest comfort for every baptized person is God's powerful and personal reassurance, sealed through the sign of baptism, that he never needs to doubt God's grace. Hence the Bible calls baptism "the washing of rebirth" (Titus 3:5).

Physical birth is the beginning of physical life which terminates in physical death. Baptism, however, represents the door leading to spiritual life that will culminate in eternal life. Rebirth is found at the beginning of that spiritual life.

Are All Baptized Children Saved?

If all baptized children were spiritually reborn, they would be saved. Although the Bible calls baptism "the washing of rebirth," not all baptized children

are reborn. The Old Testament presents us with a number of individuals who, although they were circumcised, did not believe (Ishmael, Esau).

In the New Testament we read that "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (Rom. 9:6 NIV). Even among children of the covenant there are those who are not reborn; those whose hearts have not received the Holy Spirit; those who are lost.

Within the covenant, though, there is only one way by which a person can be lost, and that is the way of unbelief. That is why we may believe that children who die young are accepted through God's grace. They were not old enough yet to willfully walk in the way of unbelief.

Parents must remind their growing children of God's rich promises, but they must also point out to their children that they have a calling to accept the promises of faith. God calls them to a "new obedience."

Thus we find two elements in the covenant: the promise of the Holy Spirit who activates faith and the calling to believe in the reconciling blood of Jesus Christ. When either of these two is rejected, the covenant loses all of its force.

For Adults

The renowned Swiss theologian Karl Barth had serious objections to infant baptism. He called it an execution without sacrifice, and meant that

baptism should not be administered without a preceding confession of faith. He echoes the ancient objection raised by anabaptists who also felt that baptism could be administered only when preceded by a confession.

Under the powerful influence of Karl Barth, many people have come to doubt the legitimacy of infant baptism. It is unquestionably true that in areas where the gospel is first brought, by and large only adults are baptized. After all, the Word of God addresses people who hear and understand, and it is only after faith has come that baptism can follow. But missionaries are also confronted with the question: What about children of parents who have come to believe? If they take the Bible seriously, they will have to conclude that baptism in the case of believing parents does not apply merely to individuals, but to the entire family. According to Acts 16:15: ". . . she and the members of her

household were baptized . . ." (NIV). Again, Acts 16:31 reads: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (NIV). Yet again, Acts 18:8 says, "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his *entire household* believed in the Lord" (NIV). Finally, I Corinthians 1:16: "Yes, I also baptized the *household* of Stephanas" (NIV).

Who can deny that the Bible sees faith coming to an entire household as a unity? That household unity, used by the covenant of grace as an avenue for growth, is a prominent theme in Holy Scripture (compare also I Cor. 7:14).

On the Textbook

1. Is it important that God did this to Moses just before he went to Egypt?
2. Did Zipporah want her son to be circumcised?
3. Why hadn't Moses already circumcised his son?
4. Why don't we circumcise anymore?
5. Weren't girls included in the covenant with God?
6. How did Jesus feel about children? How do you know that?
7. Should all children, inside the church and outside, be baptized? What did Jesus do that will help us answer this question?
8. How can children be baptized if they're too little to believe anything?
9. Does baptism place children in the covenant?
10. Is baptism a sign that the baby believes, or a guarantee that he will believe?
11. Can covenant children—like you and me—be lost, even if we're baptized?

On the Bible

1. Read Acts 2:37-42. Why were the people "cut to the heart"? What did Peter say must happen before they can be baptized? What promise is Peter speaking about in verse 39? (Check Q & A 70, Heid. Cat.) Compare what Peter says in verse 39 to Acts 16:15, and 16:31. Did the apostles baptize children? Compare this to Genesis 17:23, 27. Are there similarities between what Abraham did and what the apostles did? If so, what are they? Does this shed any light on the debate about infant baptism as opposed to "believer baptism"?

For Discussion

1. Is God as serious about baptism as He was about circumcision? (Think of what He said to Abraham, and what He did to Moses.)
2. Doesn't one's baptism become meaningless if one rejects God? Does God withdraw His promises? Keep in mind that "in all covenants there are contained two parts," and that baptized people are "obliged unto new obedience."
3. "When we present our daughter for baptism, we are dedicating her to God." Discuss.

Lord's Day XXVIII

Illustration: Communion is really a great feast of liberation.
Mark 14:12-26

The fifth of May is Liberation Day in the Netherlands. After five years of Nazi oppression, finally freedom! Anyone who remembers that day, remembers how the people went wild with joy. That was because the war, and the occupation, had been so hard on them. They had been reduced to slavery. Countless numbers had been transported to concentration camps, and many had died there.

Long ago, Israel was also a nation of slaves. The oppression had lasted for such a long time, that people had forgotten the meaning of the word freedom. Hundreds of years of slavery merged into the drudgery of forced labor under a burning, tropical sun.

But suddenly one day . . . liberation!—a liberation so tremendously overwhelming that Israel would always commemorate it through the centuries as a special gift of God. The day was known as the Passover, and it meant just that: passing over. On that day God had punished the Egyptians for their wrong deeds but He had passed over the homes of His people. Had they not also deserved His punishment? Actually, the nation of Israel, even though it knew God, was no better than Egypt. The journey through the desert would soon prove how sinful the Israelites really were; how smallminded and ungrateful they could be. In all fairness the Lord could have instructed the angel of death to punish Israel along with Egypt. The fact that He did not showed His mercy toward His people.

On the day of Passover the head of every Israelite household was instructed to kill a lamb and to dab the blood of that lamb on the lintel of the doorframe. The angel of death made his rounds in Egypt that night and took the lives of all the firstborn, even the firstborn of the Egyptian livestock. But wherever the angel saw the blood smeared on the doorframe, he passed over. Through the blood of the Passover sacrifice, the lamb, the Israelites were spared.

That same night Israelite families were to eat a

Passover meal. They were told to eat the meat of the lamb roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread without yeast. The bitterness of the herbs symbolized the bitterness of Egypt's oppression, while the unleavened bread symbolized the leaven of sin which penetrates everything and must be removed.

From this time on, the Passover feast was celebrated annually in Israel. But even though it was a great feast, it was really only temporary; it was to be followed by something better. Obviously, a small lamb could not save anyone from death; the real lamb was still to come. That is why it was such a momentous occasion when John the Baptist said: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:20 NIV). Jesus was the real lamb. That is why He spoke to His disciples, during the last Passover celebrated with them, not of Old Testament prophecy, but of New Testament fulfillment.

During the meal, He took a piece of bread, broke it and said: "This is My body given for you; do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19 NIV). The disciples were no longer to think simply of a slaughtered lamb and of the redemption from Egypt, but of their own redemption through the body of the One who was breaking the bread. When Jesus was crucified they would come to realize the exact meaning of His words.

Jesus then took the cup and gave thanks. The head of a Jewish household would customarily say: "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, who was created the fruit of the vine." Possibly Jesus used the same words, but in a deeper sense, for He Himself was the vine. He added: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor. 11:25 NIV). Again He pointed to salvation from the slavery of sin through the cross and His blood. His disciples were told to remember, always. The church must, therefore, celebrate this feast of redemption until the day of His return.

**No Longer
a Sacrifice**

A sacrificial lamb was necessary for the Passover meal.

The blood of this slaughtered lamb was poured out, symbolizing reconciliation. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He no longer used the symbol of the slaughtered lamb but only bread and wine.

During circumcision and Passover, blood flowed, but at baptism and the Lord's Supper, that is no longer the case. The only sacrifice that remains is the *Lamb of God* offered for us on the cross. It is not right, then, as the Roman Catholic church does, to speak of a sacrifice and of a priest each time communion is administered. "By one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Heb.10:14 NIV).

**The Sign
of the
Lord's Supper**

The signs of the Lord's Supper are the bread and the wine.

They symbolize two things. First, bread and wine were the

staple foods for the people of Israel, and therefore, were necessary to live. Second, Jesus is the true bread and the true wine (or the true vine)—the only way by which we can live truly in communion with God.

In the communion service, the bread is broken and the wine is poured out. That means that we are now allowed to live with God in a new covenant, because Jesus has allowed His body to be broken and His blood poured out as a sacrifice for our sins.

**The Seal
of the
Lord's Supper**

A seal affirms that something is real. During the Lord's Supper Jesus tells us that His sacrifice was real and that He

has accomplished everything for us. Believers do not partake of the Supper to testify that they have committed no sin and have done rather well. On the contrary, when they partake they confess that they are no better than the disciples the night that Jesus was betrayed, and that they are deeply aware of their many sins. Through the signs of the broken bread and the poured out wine, Jesus tells them that He is their Mediator who has taken away their sins. That is why the minister may say: "The bread which we break is a communion of the body of Christ. Take, eat, remember, and believe that the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was broken unto a complete remission of all our sins."

Just as bread and wine strengthen and refresh

the body, the Savior strengthens and renews our hearts through faith in Him.

**The
Congregation
at the
Lord's Supper**

No one can celebrate communion alone. It is a meal to be shared by man. This was the way Christ wanted it. Although broken bread was passed around

to many, there is only one bread. Likewise, wine is poured out to many, yet there is only one cup. Both symbolize the unity of the church, the one body of Christ. In the same way that we share the Lord's Supper as the family of God, so we must share our love in Christ together always; not only in word, but also in deed.

**The
Lord's Supper
and Children***

Why are children not allowed to share communion? Do they not belong to the church? Indeed they do, but the celebra-

tion of the Lord's Supper demands a mature faith. We must know what is involved in celebrating the Lord's Supper. The Bible says that we must know how to discern the body of Christ. This means that we have to know what we are doing in order not to treat sacred things in a sacriligious way.

The ability to discern or perceive becomes apparent when we make confession of faith. Confession of faith also means that we now wish to participate in the Lord's Supper.

Because children are not admitted to the table, it does not mean that they are considered unbelievers. No, indeed, for they belong to the church. God has established His covenant with them, but they have not yet accepted that covenant personally in the midst of the congregation. Their parents continue to bear responsibility for them. When they make public confession of faith, they accept responsibility for themselves. Then they join their parents at the communion table, and their fathers and mothers become brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

For Adults

In the early church the Lord's Supper was preceded by a communal love meal. Paul speaks of this in I Corinthians 11.

The Love Meal

In verse 20 and 21, Paul writes: "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for

anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk" (NIV).

Prior to the Lord's Supper, members of these small churches came together for a communal meal. It was known as a love meal because the members together looked after the food and drink. It was a beautiful expression of communal ownership.

But even then, it was clear that the church was made up of sinful people who carried their wicked inclinations into the church with them. Gradually, the wealthy became more and more annoyed at having to provide the lion's share of these meals. Thus, rather than sharing equally, they began to consume whatever provisions they had brought to the meal, leaving the less well-to-do with little or nothing at all. In the end, the whole business of communal love meals was abandoned. Nevertheless, the form for the Lord's Supper continues to require us to be ready to help one another. It tells us to "show this towards one another, not only in words, but also in deeds."

How Frequently?

The early church held communion every time it met. John Calvin wanted to restore this practice but was not permitted to do so by the local government.

It has become customary for us to celebrate the Lord's Supper every three months. Other churches do it once every two months. It would be more scriptural to do it every Sunday. The practical objection to this is the danger that the preaching of the Word might not be the focal point anymore. Also, church services would become longer than the pace of life would permit.

The way it is now, the Lord's Supper is a special celebration in our church life, the same way that Passover was a special celebration in Israel. The relative rarity of the event underlines its importance. Thus it may be wise to maintain the custom we have now. In this period of spiritual crisis, when people feel greater need for close communion with Christ, they may themselves request to have the Lord's Supper administered more frequently.

*In later years, the author re-examined his thinking on children partaking of the Lord's Supper. Although he did set an age limit of twelve, he felt that those from that age on and up, could be allowed to partake if they were able to say that they truly loved the Lord Jesus and believed He died for their sins. He also came to conclude that parental perception of spiritual maturity in a child was necessary, as each child will differ.

On the Textbook

1. Are there parts of the Passover celebration that seem similar to our Lord's Supper? What are they?
2. Why did God ask that blood be painted on the doorframes? Why not something else? (Check Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22 for help.)
3. Having answered No. 2, can you explain why we don't use blood in the Lord's Supper?
4. Of what is the Lord's Supper a "sign"?
5. What does the Lord's Supper "seal" to the believer?
6. Who deserves to go to the Lord's Supper table? Only the least sinful believers? Why, or why not?
7. Why can't Christians celebrate communion in other places, or at other gatherings besides in church?
8. Is there a way in which you already participate in the Lord's Supper, without eating and drinking?
9. When are you ready to make a public profession of your faith?

On the Bible

1. Read Exodus 12:1-28. Name the different elements or dishes which formed the Passover meal. Why do you think they were told to eat unleavened bread? Try to find out what leaven was a symbol of in the Old Testament from a Bible teacher or Bible handbook. How about the bitter herbs? Why were they told to eat it in haste? What does the lamb make you think of? Check John 1:29. How often was Passover to be celebrated? On which day? What day was it when Jesus was crucified? Check Matthew 26:2, 17-19. What were the fathers supposed to tell their children when they asked about "this service"?
2. Read Revelation 19:1-10. Who recorded all the things in this book? Where was he? Who gave him these visions? (Find these things out in ch. 1.) What is the great multitude shouting? Why are they so happy? Who is "the Lamb"? Who is "the Bride"? (Check Ephesians 5:21-27, Rev. 21:2, 9ff.) What is the fine linen? Compare this to Matthew 22:11-14. Does this scene, in Rev. 19, have anything to do with the Lord's Day you are studying?

For Discussion

1. John called Jesus the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). The Passover lamb, as you know, was to be an unblemished lamb. Read John 19:28-37. Having read this, what does it mean that Jesus’ body “is broken” for believers? Think of the way bread was eaten in the days of Jesus and the disciples. Maybe 1 Corinthians 10:16 will help.
2. People in Reformed churches used to come forward to sit around a table to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Now many of us celebrate in the pew. How does each custom reflect our unity as church? What is gained or lost with each? Which would you prefer, and why?

Lord's Day XXIX, XXXa

Illustration

Have you ever heard of William Farel, the red-haired, fiery predecessor of John Calvin? Like Calvin, he also preached the gospel in Geneva and in other parts of French speaking Switzerland. Just how much the battle of the Reformation had to do with the Lord's Supper, which Roman Catholics call the mass, will come out as we discuss Farel's life.

Around the year 1530, many places in southern and southwestern Switzerland were still completely Roman Catholic. Luther's books were not read there, as they had been written either in German or in Latin.

Farel traveled from village to village, talking to people on their way to church. His message, the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, was not well received. He was stoned in some places and beaten in others. It would have been easier to put out a forest fire, though, than to stop Farel. Wherever he went, he felt compelled to preach.

One Sunday in 1531, mass was being administered in a small church in the Swiss village of Vallangin. The pews were filled with church members, all saying their rosaries as the priest chanted in Latin. The back door quietly opened and a stranger entered. Slowly he moved down the aisle to the front. People whispered: "Who is that stranger? Look at that red beard! Do you suppose he has a special message?" The priest calmly continued the Eucharist: "Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus. Dominus deus sabbaoth." (Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts). A bell rang three times and all church members fell to their knees. The priest took a small piece of bread in both hands, raised it and said: "Hoc est corpus meum." (This is my body). Then he knelt to worship the bread which, according to Roman Catholic thought, had changed into the body of Christ. Again the tiny bell was heard. The believers stayed on their knees, bowed their heads and crossed themselves reverently in honor of the wafer of bread (host) which, they believed, placed God in their midst.

At this point, the stranger strode up from the center of the aisle where he had been standing, and climbed the pulpit. His voice reverberated to the

very rafters: "The piece of bread you worship is not God; it is merely a piece of unleavened bread made of flour and water." Everyone stared at him, thunderstruck. After a few moments of deep silence, a young man jumped to his feet and walked to the altar. Taking the host from the dumbfounded priest he shouted emotionally: "It's true! This is not God! If you worship this, you worship an idol. God can't be a piece of bread! God is above us, in heaven!"

The first to recover his speech was the priest. Turning to the pulpit he shouted: "Tell us, you godless devil, who you are! Who sent you? How dare you come here to confuse us!"

Farel shot back: "I am no devil but God's messenger! My Lord, Jesus Christ, sent me. I have not come to confuse you but to proclaim the truth of the gospel."

A ripple of excitement ran through the church. Some of the worshipers had recognized this red-haired stranger, whispering loudly: "This is Master William Farel, the Elijah of the Alps! What should we do, throw him out or hear what he has to say?" Their curiosity aroused, they decided to let Farel stay. In vain the priest tried to urge the people to throw him out. Failing in this, he abruptly left the church.

Farel was now free to speak. He reminded them that the Latin words, no matter how impressive they sounded, could not save them. "None of the Latin mass, either chanted or spoken, will save your souls; nor will the priestly gowns and ceremonies; nor will the adoration of the host or the worship of relics! They are all superstition, and, as such, should be repudiated and destroyed!" He then reminded them that Jesus had said that no one could come to the Father except through Him. Not the Virgin Mary or all the saints of Christendom could bring them one step closer to God. Finally he challenged them: "How long will you hedge between two thoughts? If you choose for the Lord God, follow Him; if Baal, serve Him!"

The people listened intently and with obvious approval. For too many years they had lived with the faults of the Roman Catholic Church, not only

in the form of corrupt doctrine, but also in the decadent conduct of the Roman Catholic clergy. The church in Vallangin became Reformed. The Lord's Supper was instituted in place of the mass and it was served according to the instructions given by Christ.

(This story can be found in greater detail in *The March of Truth*, by Dr. St. Szabo, p. 157-164.)

A Corrupted Lord's Supper

How was it possible that the simple Lord's Supper, instituted by Jesus, was corrupted so totally by the Roman Catholic mass, in all its pomp, ceremony and misuse? The decline took place gradually, through the ages. There is a valuable lesson here: we should never try to change or improve upon those things which God's Word teaches us.

The great changes that gradually took over consisted of the institution of the *priesthood* instead of the service of the Word; the institution of the sacrifice made by the priest instead of the single sacrifice made by God; and, finally, the idea that *the bread and wine change into the body and blood of Christ* rather than accepting the bread and wine as signs and seals of His crucifixion.

A priest was someone in the Old Testament required to bring many sacrifices as symbols of the one true sacrifice that was to come. But nowhere in the New Testament church do we find priests, simply because the true sacrifice had been brought and did not need to be repeated. Yet from the earliest period of the church, priests are mentioned again—priests who offer sacrifices. Gradually the idea developed that an altar was needed, (something else that the New Testament does not mention), that Christ's sacrifice, though made on the cross, had to be repeated continually. In order for this to be a genuine sacrifice, there had to be blood. This blood, it was thought was present in the cup of communion. Whenever the hands of the priest blessed this cup, the wine changed into the blood of Jesus, and when he blessed the bread, it changed into the body of Christ.

Throughout the centuries, the Roman Catholic church reinforced these teachings, until finally the Lord's Supper, or the mass, became the focal point of the service. Whenever the communion wafer, or host, was held up by the priest, it changed into the body of Christ and all believers were required to prostrate themselves and worship.

The adoration of the host had become a major ritual by the Middle Ages. Whenever somebody died, the sacrament of Extreme Unction was ad-

ministered to him. In this ritual, the priest placed the host on the tongue of the dying person. Later, preceded by choirboys, he accompanied the deceased to the charnel house (a place where corpses were kept). Anyone along the way who heard this bell, had to kneel down and worship.

When, for some reason or other, the host was accidentally defiled, or a drop of wine fell on the floor and was stepped on, great fear arose among the faithful. If shortly afterwards they were struck by disaster, (flood, war or plague), everyone felt compelled to do penance to avert God's wrath because they had defiled *His body*.

In some villages it was a common sight to see priests summoned to taverns and market places to break up fights. The reasoning behind this was simple. If people would not obey the civil authorities, they were compelled to bow before the "body of Christ."

The Reformation fought this idolatry out of respect for the real body of the Lord, who is now exalted in heaven.

This Is My Body

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He said: "Take and eat; this is My body" (Matt. 26:26 NIV). Does it not follow from these words, that the bread He was holding in His hands changed into His body? Do Roman Catholics therefore not have a right to appeal to Matthew 26:26?

Absolutely not! Think of the disciples who were gathered around the table. Did they really think that Jesus was standing there holding a piece of His own body? That interpretation makes no sense at all. The disciples undoubtedly concluded that Jesus was speaking symbolically, as He was when He said: "I am the door . . . I am the true vine . . . I am the good shepherd." In all these expressions Jesus was merely comparing Himself to a door, a vine, and a shepherd. In the case of the Lord's Supper, it is just as evident that He compared Himself with the true bread.

This becomes even more clear when we note what Jesus says about the wine. If the Roman Catholics are right, then Jesus should have said of the wine: "This is My blood." But His words were: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20 NIV). These words can only be interpreted as being symbolic. The phrase "this cup is the new covenant . . ." did not mean that the cup changed into the actual covenant, but that it represented that covenant. Since Jesus spoke symbolically of the cup and the wine, He must also have done so about the bread.

The Great Difference

When you enter a Roman Catholic church, you will find the altar as center. When you enter a Protestant church, you will find the pulpit as center. This is the great difference that underscores the dissimilarity between Protestant and Roman Catholic worship services. The central aspect of the Protestant service is: that God must be worshiped in heaven; that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father; that through His Holy Spirit He wants to be present in our midst; and, that the proclamation of God's Word must testify to the completed work of the Lord Jesus.

In contrast, the central aspects of the Roman Catholic church service are:

1. That God is present on the altar through the communion wafer and wine;
2. That the priest has the power, through his blessings, to call into being the presence of the Lord;
3. That through the priest's hands, Christ's sacrifice on Golgotha is repeated;
4. That this sacrifice made by the priest is necessary for both the living and the dead (in Purgatory).

For Adults

We call the Roman Catholic doctrine of communion "*transubstantiation*" (trans meaning "carry over," substantiation or substance meaning independent material); the completed word therefore, meaning changing one form of matter into another.

The Roman Catholics also teach that, although a real change takes place in the bread and wine since they become the body and blood of Christ, the external properties of this bread and wine (color and taste) remain the same. Since Roman Catholics are afraid of spilling the blood of Christ, they do not allow the common people (laymen) to touch the cup. They say that laymen already receive Christ, His body and blood, in the wafer.

Unfortunately, Protestants disagree among themselves about the manner in which the Lord's Supper should be kept. Luther's concept differs from Zwingli's, and Calvin's differs from both.

The Lutheran understanding of communion is called *consubstantiation*, the word con meaning "along with." According to Luther, after Christ's ascension His human nature was not only glorified, it was also deified. Thus Christ's body also obtained the attribute of omnipresence. On the basis of this omnipresence, Christ's body can always be present at communion. Although the communion bread does not actually change into Christ's body, it is

nevertheless *present with the bread*, in the same way that water is contained in a sponge.

By contrast, Zwingli favored a symbolic interpretation. He rejected any suggestion that Christ's body was present in the bread. For Zwingli, communion was a commemorative meal, a celebration where believers, united together, proclaimed the death of their Lord.

Calvin agreed with this up to a point. But he argued that this was not enough. Zwingli's viewpoint, he said, did justice to the partaker's act of faith but failed to do justice to the true presence of Christ. According to Calvin, Christ is actually present at communion. This is not through any change from bread into the body of Christ, but rather through the work of His Holy Spirit in the believer's heart. The work of the Holy Spirit establishes such a close knit relationship between Christ and believers, "so that, though Christ is in heaven and we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones."

That is why our Lord's Supper prayer contains the words: "In order that our burdened and contrite hearts, through the power of the Holy Spirit, may be nourished and refreshed with His true body and blood."

On the Textbook

1. Who was William Farel? Where did he do his "preaching"?
2. Do you know who Martin Luther was? What did he teach?
3. What did the people do when the bell tinkled? Why?
4. Was Farel right to do what he did? Shouldn't he have been more respectful?
5. Whose words did Farel quote ("If you choose for the Lord . . .")? When were these words first spoken?
6. What "three great changes" turned the Lord's Supper into the Roman Catholic mass?
7. Why can't we find any Old Testament type priests in the New Testament?
8. Why did people begin to feel the need for an altar in church? What is it used for?
9. Is the mass really an "accursed idolatry"? (Check Q & A 80, p. 264 text.)

10. Which Bible verse is used by the Roman Catholic church to support its doctrine of the mass? Have they interpreted this verse correctly? How does the author believe we should understand Jesus' words?
11. Can you tell from a Roman Catholic church building what they believe about the Lord's Supper? Does your church reflect what it believes?
12. List the four "central aspects" of the Roman Catholic worship service.

On the Bible

1. Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1. What is the problem Paul is addressing? Was everyone in the Corinthian church involved in eating meat sacrificed to idols? To what is Paul referring when he talks about conscience, giving offense, and "the good of the neighbour"? What do you think was happening? What parallel does Paul draw between eating at idol feasts, and eating the Lord's Supper? Compare verse 16 with verse 18b. What does Paul mean by "a participation" in the body or in the blood of Christ? Which verse speaks to the issue of church unity? What does it say? Is there a modern situation in the church today, similar to what Paul was dealing with?

For Discussion

1. Isn't it the task of the church to be united? Why then does the catechism focus so much on our difference with the Roman Catholic church? Why make such a big deal about it?
2. Some people want to get rid of Question and Answer 80. Perhaps you know that it was not a part of the first edition of the Heidelberg Catechism. Apparently, many Roman Catholics no longer believe what the catechism presents as the teaching of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass. Should we then get rid of this question and answer? Why, or why not? As you answer these questions, keep in mind the difference between "official doctrine," and the unofficial opinions of the people, especially as that is worked out in the Roman Catholic church.
3. How do we know that we are right about the Lord's Supper? How would you explain our confession in the Heidelberg Catechism to a Roman Catholic, or to an unbeliever?

Lord's Day XXXb

Illustration:

Matthew

22:1-14

It is a wonderful thing to participate in the Lord's Supper!

It is the most blessed meal of all time. That is why we must

prepare ourselves, not in the sense that we depend on ourselves, but in the sense that we know that we totally depend on Christ.

We can only participate in the Lord's Supper through faith. This is made very clear in the well-told parable of the wedding banquet.

Once there was a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. It was a grand celebration lasting, not just a few hours, but days and days. In honor of the King's son, everyone in the palace was required to be full of joy.

Emissaries were sent throughout the country to invite the guests: governors, mayors, nobles, men and women of good standing. You would think that these people would have been honored to receive an invitation from their King. But, incredible as it may seem, they were quite put out. As a matter of fact, they disliked the King intensely and were not about to please him.

Now had the ruler been a tyrant, this reaction would have been understandable. There have been cruel leaders in past time who have earned the hatred of their people. But the King in the parable was a very good and kind King. The people could not bear him a grudge because of ill treatment. Their unjustified, cropped-up anger was the result of evil desires to be on their own—to have no King and no law.

When the King's messengers arrived to invite them to the banquet, some rudely turned them away, ignoring the servants. Others mistreated the messengers, even killing some. This, understandably, enraged the King. He mobilized his powerful army to teach them a lesson. He destroyed the murderers and burned their city.

The story, however, does not end here. There remained the unattended wedding banquet. Again the King sent out messengers, although this time not to the nobles of the land. Instead, they were told to invite anyone they met, no one excepted. Anyone could partake of the good King's feast.

This time, the banqueting hall was packed. People from all walks of life attended—people with no reputation, people with bad reputations and people with good reputations. Before entering the palace, though, they were all required to change their clothes. No matter what they had on, they had to change, and put on a new white garment in honor of the King and his son.

Finally, the festivities began. Everyone was happy, eating, drinking and singing praises in honor of the King. When he entered to see his guests, all eyes turned to look at him full of joy. His entrance was suddenly stopped though, and his voice was heard. He addressed a man who had failed to put on a wedding garment. "Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?" (Matt. 22:12 NIV). The man had come in quietly, perhaps through the back door. He hadn't wanted to be bothered with a wedding garment but now he was speechless. He could not think of a single excuse and looked around apprehensively. "Then the King told the attendants: 'Tie him hand and foot and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'" (Matt. 22:13 NIV). A dreadful punishment for an inexcusable offense.

The Lord's Supper— A Royal Wedding Banquet!

What is the meaning of this parable? You will have sensed that the King represents God Himself and that the King's son represents the Lord Jesus Christ. The wedding banquet of

the King's Son will take place in heaven and is described in Revelation 19:7.

But the beginning of that great feast is found on earth. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. That kingdom of heaven has been brought to earth by Jesus, even though its perfection will not take place until the end of the world.

The kingdom of heaven is something very beautiful, much more so than any earthly kingdom.

It is both wonderful and reassuring that God wants to be our King, both now and later, in the new heaven and the new earth.

Our great heavenly King also shows us that He loves us by giving us a wedding banquet here on earth; a wedding banquet otherwise known as the Lord's Supper. That Supper is held in honor of His Son who has done everything for the King's subjects; He has redeemed them from that old tyrant, the devil.

From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.

Many are invited to that Lord's Supper and it is wonderful to hear the words: "The King is calling; are you coming?"

People Who Refuse to Come There are people who reject God's generous invitation. In the parable of the banquet Jesus especially referred to the Jews who rebuffed Him time and again. They had been called often, but they had responded by killing the prophets who called them, and soon they would also kill the King's Son.

There are still people who say "no" to God's invitation, including young people born into the covenant of God and invited by the King through their baptism. Although they have heard of His goodness, they simply refuse to come. They prefer to stay independent. They want nothing to do with God and religion, experiencing it as something that ties them down. How wrong they are! They can never be free, for, as Jesus said in John 8:34: "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (NIV). There are no free people. They are either bound by sin and Satan, or they are bound by Jesus who redeems them from sin. But no one is free to do as he wishes and those who decline the King's invitation will ultimately come to ruin: "The King was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city" (Matt. 22:7 NIV).

Those Who Accept the Invitation Fortunately, there are also many people who accept God's invitation brought by the messengers. Who are these people? —perhaps the very righteous? The catechism describes them in this way. "Those who

are truly displeased with themselves for their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ, and that their remaining infirmity is covered by His passion and death."

Remember that! Sometimes, young people hear God calling but are reluctant to accept. They might think: "I can't live up to what is expected of me," foolishly believing that they will be expected to be perfect. Of course, that is impossible. We need Jesus every day, just because we sin every day. But it is precisely those people who realize their constant shortcomings who are invited to the Lord's Supper. At the Lord's table, you will never hear someone say: "Sit at the head of the table. You really deserve it." The message there is: "There is complete remission for all your sins."

The white robe that people were given when they entered the palace was not their own. It was *given* to them by their King. That robe represents the righteousness of Christ which covers all our sins.

But the catechism says more. It adds that the Lord's Supper is for those "who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life." Remember that too! If you really believe in Christ, you will want your faith to grow stronger and stronger. You will realize just how small that faith really is and how often you forget the Lord; you will want to avoid doing anything that hurts Him; you will want to do what God wants you to do.

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.

People Who Say "Yes" but Mean "No" The catechism also mentions hypocrites, people who pretend to be something they're not. Think of Judas Iscariot, who seemed to be Jesus' friend and yet was His enemy. Or think of Ananias and Sapphira, who appeared for all the world to be generous believers, but were actually proud and dishonest.

In Jesus' parable one of these hypocrites is unmasked. The King makes it very clear to all those present that such a person does not belong at the wedding banquet. However, it is not always possible to gauge a person's true nature in church. We cannot look inside a person to see if he is appearing in character. Nor can we monitor all of his conduct to make sure he lives a decent life every minute of the day. But if people, whose hearts are not sincere, participate in the Lord's Supper, they are said to eat and drink judgment unto themselves.

This judgment is not eternal judgment. People in

the church of Corinth who called down this judgment upon themselves became ill, some of them dying. God can show His displeasure with people in a number of ways. We should not take that lightly.

The Task of the Consistory

Even though we cannot look into each other's hearts, we can sometimes evaluate someone's behavior and speech. In ancient Israel, blasphemers were condemned to death, as were people who had violated the commandment concerning the Sabbath. These were open breaches of law, that anyone could hear or see.

Such violations still take place in the church today. That is why the King of the church has appointed people to supervise the conduct of members of the church and to assess their behavior according to His law. These people are the consistory or council.

The consistory's main task is not, of course, to police the affairs of church members. Its main task is to make public the King's message that the Lord's Supper is for repentant sinners. Yet the consistory must also, to the best of its ability, see to it that the Lord's Supper is not desecrated. People who do not wear wedding garments are not allowed to participate.

Lord's Day 31 shows what the consistory should do with such people.

For Adults

Before attending the Lord's Supper we must all examine ourselves. That is why we have a preparatory service. The purpose of this service is to remind us to wear the garment God provides.

There has been much conflict concerning this self-examination and the nature of the wedding garment. Distinctions have been made between the *status* and the *condition* of the Christian. "Status" has meant participating in Jesus Christ, while "condition" has referred to whether or not the Christian's lifestyle conformed to that.

The status of Peter was that he was a child of God, but his condition, at times, was that he doubted and denied. Similarly, the status of Jacob was that he was a believer in God's promises, but his condition revealed that he sometimes lied and cheated. The status of the Christian cannot be changed because God's work cannot be changed. His condition, however, is changeable because he is and remains a sinful being.

It has sometimes been said that the parable's

wedding garment refers to a person's status before God. That is, whether or not he has been made righteous through the blood of Christ. Therefore, a person's self-examination would mean that he asks himself whether he believes this.

It has also been said that the parable's wedding garment refers to the condition of the Christian, or of that person who professes to be a Christian. The focus then falls on his way of life, on his sanctification. In this emphasis a person examining himself should ask whether his life really conforms to the Word of God or whether, before proceeding to the Lord's table, he should change that lifestyle.

In brief, the questions would read: Do I have faith and do I walk according to that faith?

The best reply is provided by Calvin who wrote: "It is futile to quarrel about the wedding garment and to ask whether it refers to faith or to pious and sanctified life. Faith cannot be separated from good works and good works can only proceed from faith."

Faith is a unity. It rests on justification through the blood of Christ. It lives in sanctification by the Spirit of Christ. If there is something wrong with one, it will show in the other. All self-examination should conclude with the prayer: "Forgive all my sins and make me walk steadfastly in the way of salvation."

On the Textbook

1. How did the invited guests respond to the king's invitation?
2. What did the king do to the rebellious cities?
3. Was the feast cancelled? Who received invitations this time?
4. Which person "stood out like a sore thumb"? Why?
5. Was the king angry with this person?
6. Who is the king, and who is his son, in this parable?
7. What is the "wedding banquet here on earth" that the church already celebrates?
8. What are people saying to God when they refuse to come to the table?
9. Are people who accept the invitation gladly boasting about themselves? Why, or why not?
10. What did the white garment stand for in the parable? What helps you to understand now why the man was thrown out of the wedding hall?

11. If no one deserves to come to the Lord's Supper anyway, why is it so bad when "people who say 'Yes,' but mean 'No' " come?
12. Who has received the task of watching over the Lord's table?

On the Bible

1. Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. What is the problem that Paul has heard about? What are some of the Corinthians doing? Had they understood what the Lord's Supper is all about? What does it mean, that we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes"? To what does the church look forward when she celebrates the Lord's Supper? Against what do those who partake of the Supper in an unworthy manner sin? What is the judgment against them in Corinth (v. 30)? Who is judging them?
2. Read Exodus 24:1-8, and Hebrews 10:1-22. Why

did God require sacrifices from Israel, if they didn't really help anyway? From what passage, and what situation does Jesus get the words "this cup is the new covenant in My blood"? What are some of the differences between Old Testament sacrifices and Jesus' sacrifice? How many can you list? According to Q & A 80, have the Roman Catholics understood Hebrews 10 correctly? Explain.

For Discussion

1. Is it more obedient to say, "I don't deserve to go to the Lord's Supper, and so I will not go," or to say, "Even though I don't deserve to go, I will." Find support for your answer in the Bible.
2. If the consistory cannot tell what lives in people's hearts, why not simply allow everyone who wants to to participate in the Lord's Supper?

Lord's Day XXXI

Illustration: **Joshua 7**

Not everyone, not even every confessing member of the church can be admitted to the table of the Lord's Supper. It may occasionally be necessary to deny a confessing member access to the Lord's table. It might even be necessary to excommunicate a member from the congregation. The gravity of such an action is illustrated by the Old Testament story of Achan.

Who was Achan? He was an ordinary Israelite from the tribe of Judah. He could not have been very old, for, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, all the Israelites who had entered the land of Canaan were under forty. Achan was married and had a family. He had witnessed God's great miracles. Together with all the other Israelites, he had seen the waters of the Jordan river stop flowing as they passed through. He had seen Jericho's walls collapse after all the people had marched around the city seven times. These miraculous events must have impressed him deeply and he must have been thoroughly convinced that there was no god as great as the Lord God.

He should have had nothing but respect for the commandments of such a great God. But he did not! He was greedy and desired money, clothes—possessions that were surely within his reach when the army of Israel entered Jericho. Jericho was rich and its people lived in great luxury. But the Lord did not want His people to consider the conquest of Canaan as an expedition that merely plundered the land empty. This would degenerate God's holy war into robbery.

Hence He had told the people: "But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring disaster on it" (Joshua 6:18 NIV).

The devoted things included "all the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron" which were "sacred to the Lord" and were dedicated to Him. If the Israelites claimed any part for themselves, they would fall under the Lord's curse. The Lord wanted to maintain a sharp division be-

tween His own people and the people living in the land of Canaan, a land that had to come under His judgment.

Achan knew all about this, but still disobeyed the Lord. Alone in one of the houses of Jericho, he found a treasure—gold, silver and a beautiful robe. He coveted them fiercely and thought: "There is no one here to see me, so why should I not take this?" Removing all of it, he carefully buried them under his tent.

But God sees everything and remains true to His Word. He had warned the people not to take anything: "Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring disaster on it" (Josh. 6:18b NIV). He then brought disaster on it. When Joshua's army attacked the small town of Ai, they were routed and lost about thirty-six men.

Imagine the people's dismay and confusion! Fortunately, total disaster could still be averted. But first, Achan's evil deed had to be undone and his guilt reconciled. Joshua asked the Lord to point out the guilty man. It would have been possible during this time for Achan to confess, but he had not done so. God Himself pointed Achan out by drawing lots.

Achan's punishment was severe. Together with his entire family, he was stoned by the people of Israel. As a mistake can be erased from a page, so Achan's name was erased from the people of Israel. This was the curse of destruction, but through it the entire nation was made holy again.

The Lord Wants a Holy People

The story of Achan shows clearly that the Lord wants only a sacred people. Now that is not the same as a sinless people. Each day again Israel's priests had to bring sacrifices to reconcile their sins. A holy nation is a nation that listens to the Word of God and lives according to it. If they fail to do so, God Himself will fight them.

In later years, the people of Israel repeatedly succumbed to idolatry. Therefore, time and again, Israel found itself at the mercy of powerful and

cruel foes. In the end, they were even taken into captivity.

The New Testament church of Christ is the continuation of Old Testament Israel. The church is also suppose to be a holy people. For this reason, Christ has given His church the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Using these, she opens the door of the kingdom to all believers and closes it to all unbelievers. If the church were to fail in this task, the wrath of God would come down upon it.

The Keys of the Kingdom of God

What are the keys of the kingdom? Jesus mentioned them a few times. First to Peter, who before anyone else, confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. This was a tremendous confession, and at this point Jesus said to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19 NIV).

Roman Catholics, who see Peter as the first pope, conclude from this that Jesus has given all power on earth to the popes in Rome. They often depict Peter with a large key in his hand.

However, a little later, Jesus had a similar statement for all His apostles: "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18 NIV). When Jesus spoke these words to His disciples, He was thinking not only of them, but of the entire church that was to come. Just prior to this statement He had talked about the fact that if a brother sins against you and refuses to listen to the church's admonition, he was to be considered as a pagan or a tax collector. To the apostles, and after them the church, was given the power to bind and loose. To bind means to declare judgment on sin; to loose means to acquit from guilt, to forgive sins. The church may do both in Christ's name.

When Are These Keys Used?

The keys are used collectively, for all believers, whenever the minister proclaims the gospel.

No two sermons are the same and no two ministers are the same. There is much to be said for this, yet all sermons must always have two things in common: the opening and the closing of God's kingdom by means of the keys. The sermon must always reflect in some way this following quotation from Isaiah: "Tell the

righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done" (Isa. 3:10 and 11 NIV).

At a youth rally, we were once addressed by a middle-aged teacher who told us how he had found his way back to the church. As a young man he had attended church regularly, for this had been the tradition in his home. He had heard many ministers preach on civilization and culture, but not on the gospel. So he had stopped going to church. Much later, a young preacher had taken charge of the church he used to go to. The teacher decided to attend the installation service. In this first sermon to his new congregation, the preacher had warned: "Please be forewarned that my sermons will be somewhat monotonous. Every Sunday I will proclaim only one gospel which will always deal with that single great feature found in this morning's text: Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; and whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but only the wrath of God."

The young minister had preached about this theme, and the teacher, in full agreement, had decided to start attending church once more. After the service he wanted to talk to the minister about his decision. Upon entering the consistory room, he found that members of the consistory were rather upset with the minister, telling him that if he planned to be old-fashioned in his preaching, attendance would soon drop to nothing. The young minister reminded them that he was new, asking them to wait and see.

In time, it turned out that the young minister's message was so well received that people showed up an hour early to make sure they could find a seat in the church. People came from all over town to hear him preach the gospel.

A sermon should not be just an intriguing story. It must have tension, yes, but that tension dealing with the souls of human beings and the opening and closing of God's kingdom. "Therefore consider carefully how you listen," said Jesus (Luke 8:18 NIV). Even if we are too young to understand, we must learn to listen. And even if we cannot understand everything, we can certainly understand that the kingdom of God is more important than anything else; that the door of this kingdom is open wide, also for us, and that it would be a disaster if this door were to close simply because we did not want to be bothered with God's grace.

What Is the Christian Ban?

The kingdom of heaven is not opened or closed only by the preaching of the gospel. It may be necessary to correct someone personally because he does not seem to pay any visible attention to the Word of God.

Jesus talks about this in Matthew 18. In verse 15 we read: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over" (NIV). Jesus places great emphasis here on the personal approach between members of the church. Members may not remain aloof from each other, leaving the overall direction of the body of Christ to the church's consistory. The tie between the members of a church must be so strong that they will care enough about each other to point out sins.

Naturally, we should not concern ourselves with trivia. Each person has his own peculiar personality and character. People could never live together in peace if every little thing had to be discussed in detail. Through love we should be able to absorb a lot of things, for love bears all things.

But whenever a church member clearly commits a sin against God, another church member should feel free to point this out to him. He should never think to himself: "It's not going to help anyway." Jesus said, "If he listens to you . . ." and listening is a gift given by Jesus Himself through His Holy Spirit.

It is possible too, though, that the person will harden his heart and refuse to listen. In such a case, according to Jesus, one or two witnesses are to be called. The number of people involved should be minimal, to keep the matter as private as possible. It is advisable to select reliable, mature people for this sort of thing, preferably people who know the person well and can influence him positively. If he refuses to listen even then, the matter must be disclosed to the entire church, and all should try to get him to listen. If this fails and he still refuses to listen, he is to be treated as a pagan or a tax collector. That is to say, he must be excommunicated from the church.

Such expulsion is not just church procedure but an event that takes place in the kingdom of God. Through the keys, the door to the kingdom of God is closed to the person in question. This is a very serious matter, for God Himself endorses it. In fact, He says to the person in question: "Unless you repent, you will be lost eternally."

The only redeeming feature of such a sad event is that conversion is possible during life. It calls to mind the story of the Old Testament king Manasseh.

There have been occasions, although few in

number, that the form for readmission has been used.

How Does the Church Talk to a Sinner?

Is the church always ready and willing to excommunicate a persistent sinner? This would certainly not be according to Jesus' teaching. He Himself long endured the taunts and lies of sinners and He personified gentleness and compassion. No, the matter of censure is first of all for the consistory, which does not make it public. Elders have an important, often difficult task. They must try to bring willful people back into the will of Christ. However, if these people refuse to listen, they must not be allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper. This *silent censure* is not made known to the congregation.

If the person in question does not repent even then, the congregation will have to be told and be encouraged to pray for the person. Thus silent censure becomes public, and this is done in three successive stages.

First the congregation is told that someone has violated a specific commandment. They are asked to pray for this person.

Secondly, with the approval of classis, the name of this person is made known to the congregation.

Finally, it is announced that the person in question will be excommunicated from the church.

It can take a very long time, often years, between denying access to the Lord's Supper and the various other stages of public censure. Frequently excommunication does not take place because the censured person withdraws from the church.

The Purpose of Discipline

Some people loathe the word "discipline." They like words like "freedom" and "happiness." They believe that individuals are responsible for their own deeds and should, therefore, be left alone. In many churches discipline is simply not maintained. People are allowed to speak and preach as they wish and they also have the freedom to do as they like. There is no discipline in either teaching or in lifestyle. This is clearly in conflict with God's Word.

The Word of God requires discipline to be maintained in the church, for the following reasons:

- (a) For the glory of God's name. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys

God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (I Cor. 3:16 and 17 NIV).

- (b) For the preservation of the church. "Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?" (I Cor. 5:6 NIV).
- (c) For the salvation of the sinner. "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11 NIV).

For Adults

The chain of reasoning that the Roman Catholic church uses to prove the pope's power over the keys has several weak links.

The Power of the Pope

- (a) Peter was indeed the first one to receive the power of the keys, but later the other apostles received it also. Peter calls himself a fellow elder to the elders, who may not lord it over those entrusted to them (I Peter 5:1 and 3).
- (b) Nowhere does the Bible show that Peter was the first bishop or pope of Rome.
- (c) The Bible does not show either, that the later bishops of Rome were Peter's successors.
- (d) Neither does the Bible show that these Roman bishops had the right to exercise power over the entire church.
- (e) The Bible does show, however, that the word "bishop" (episcopos) is the same as that of "elder" (presbyter). A careful reading of Titus 1:5-7 is in order here.

The Meaning of the Church

We often underestimate the meaning of the church. Some people tend to think of it as a private club of which you can become a member, but out of which you can drop at will.

However, Jesus has given great power to that church—the power of opening and closing the kingdom of God. That is why we must always take the church seriously. And if the question comes up: "What church? There are so many," we can honestly say: "If your church confesses Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, stay there and confess His name."

On the Textbook

1. Who was Achan? What did he do?

2. Why did Israel have to punish him? Why was the Lord so terribly angry about Achan's sin?
3. What does it mean that Israel and the church are "the holy people of God"?
4. What are the keys of the kingdom, and where in Scripture does Jesus speak about them?
5. In whose name does the church use the keys?
6. How do you experience the use of the keys?
7. What must all sermons have in common?
8. What is the task of *every member* in the use of the key of discipline?
9. What are the steps in the discipline process? Where has the church been taught to follow these steps?
10. Does the final step, the step of excommunication, leave open the possibility of the sinner's return?
11. Who in the church has the important task of carrying out *official* discipline, beginning with "private censure"?
12. List the three purposes of discipline.

On the Bible

1. Read 1 Corinthians 5. How had the Corinthians reacted to the terrible sin in their congregation? Can you find a verse that tells you how Paul was concerned for the salvation of the man committing the sin? Can you find anything in the passage that shows Paul's concern for the whole congregation's wellbeing? What is Paul trying to say when he talks about "yeast and dough" in verse 6?
2. Read Ephesians 5:22-33. What comparison is Paul using to illustrate how much Christ loves the church? What does Paul call the church? What do verses 26 and 27 say about the keys of the kingdom? Why is Christ so concerned that the church be "radiant," and "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish"? When someone submits himself to the discipline of the consistory, to whom are they *really* submitting? Why is it important to keep that in mind?

For Discussion

1. "I thought that we were supposed to have brotherly love for one another in the church.

Doesn't that mean that we should forgive each other, and not discipline members of the church?"

2. "Aren't we all sinners in the church? How do we dare to use the keys of the kingdom? Besides, if we discipline someone, aren't we judging them? I think that using the keys to close the kingdom is too important to leave up to sinful people."

Lord's Day XXXII

Illustration: The Epistle to Philemon

Paul's shortest epistle reads like a short novel. Now a novel is a good story which you read for personal pleasure. However, Paul's "fiction" is actually a true story even though it reads like a novel.

What kind of a story is it? It's about a slave who ran away. Many people at that time owned slaves. Abraham had slaves, some of Jesus' parables deal with slaves, and Paul called himself a slave of Jesus Christ.

Slaves were not always treated harshly. The word "slave" invariably brings to mind *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with pictures of Simon Legree whipping. In Paul's time there were also harsh masters, but more often than not a slave was someone in permanent employ, a laborer or a domestic servant who was treated kindly by his master or her mistress. For this reason the church did not radically abolish slavery right away. To have done so would have meant revolution. Slavery had always existed. Instead the church encouraged Christians to see their slaves as neighbors and their Christian slaves as brothers. This teaching meant the beginning of the end for slavery.

Paul's short epistle to Philemon is about a runaway slave. The situation can easily be understood. No matter how kind a master was, it sometimes happened that a slave simply could not bear *not being free*, belonging to someone else, always in danger of being sold.

Onesimus, a young slave from the city of Colossus, decided he had had enough of slavery. His master, a Christian by the name of Philemon, was probably a good man, but Onesimus did not want to be a slave any longer. He waited for the right opportunity and left the city at dusk one night. By the time Philemon found out he was missing, it was too late. Onesimus was free.

But his newly found freedom turned out to be difficult! Wherever he went he ran the risk of being caught and prosecuted. The Roman law dealing with runaway slaves was strict. If he were caught, he would be branded on his hands, feet or forehead with the letter F for *fugitivus*. Onesimus had seen

runaway slaves with iron collars welded around their neck. They would spend the rest of their lives like dogs on leashes. He had also seen them crucified or turned over to the authorities to fight wild animals in the arena.

It would, therefore, be wrong to suppose that Onesimus lived at ease. On the contrary, he was haunted by the fear that he might be arrested. Never staying long in one place, he traveled through the Roman Empire, always heading for Rome. Rome was the cosmopolitan center of the empire where millions lived. It was a place where Onesimus might possibly be lost in the crowd; a place where no one would be able to find him.

One day, though, Onesimus heard about a man who might know his former master. That man was Paul, a prisoner in Rome. What Onesimus heard about Paul made him curious. Reputedly he was a man who was very helpful to his fellow prisoners, easy to talk to and eagerly visited by many slaves. For some strange reason, Onesimus was irresistibly drawn to Paul and heard him proclaim the gospel. He heard that Paul declared himself free, even though he was in prison, because he had been liberated by Jesus from the greatest slavery of all, the slavery of sin. To Onesimus Paul said, "If you really want to be completely free, believe in Jesus Christ, and you will be the happiest man in the world."

That is how Onesimus came to believe. His joy knew no bounds and his gratitude was so great that he would not leave Paul's side. He wanted to do whatever he could for Paul to lighten in some way the burden of imprisonment. Onesimus had become a Christian.

One day an amazing thing happened. The fugitive Onesimus, Paul's companion and aide, was seen leaving Rome, heading back for Colossus to Philemon. Why? Because he had become a *true* Christian! That is, he no longer did what he wanted to do, but what God wanted him to do. Paul had explained to Onesimus that God wanted him to return to his master. If that was so, Onesimus dared no longer stay in Rome. Carrying Paul's letter, he began his journey. In the letter, Paul told Philemon

to take back his former slave as a beloved brother. No doubt, Philemon did so. That did not necessarily mean that he freed Onesimus. It did mean, however, that from then on, these two were members of the same household of faith. Onesimus did not run away again.

**Cannot Do
Otherwise**

Why this story? Because Lord's Day 32 asks the question: "Why must we yet do good works?"

The story of Onesimus illustrates that Christians do not *have* to do good works, but that they *cannot* do anything else.

There had been a time that Onesimus *had* to do much. His master had given him many responsibilities and among them, doubtless, there were a few that Onesimus did not care for. Yet he could never say "no."

He had been completely free in Rome. He could easily have stayed there. But he *was compelled* to return to Philemon because he had become a true Christian. And a true Christian has no choice but to serve the Lord. He can never do this perfectly, of course, for each day he sins again and must ask forgiveness. But his entire being wants to serve the Lord in such a way that he can also testify to others of God's love.

How does a person, who has become a true Christian, become so dedicated? Has he become a person of great virtue? No, for even the best person among us still has a sinful heart. Rather, something happens to that sinful heart. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in it. It is something you cannot feel or see, yet it is nonetheless real, if you believe in Jesus. Once that belief is there, the Holy Spirit goes to work, renewing your life to make it like that of Christ. The Christian sings:

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.
Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Until my heart is pure,
Until with Thee I will Thy will,
To do and to endure.

Such is the meaning of the words found in the catechism: "Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits, and that He may be praised by us."

**Can We Do
All This?**

Can we show in our lives what the Catechism tells us here? We are not runaway slaves, and what great things are we capable of performing? What is important here is whether or not we believe! The Lord asks us to believe. Taking us into His covenant, He says to each of us: "You have a sinful heart. But believe in the forgiveness of sins, and accept the Lord Jesus as your Savior." Then you will discover that you too "cannot do otherwise." Whenever it is difficult to tell the truth and a lie seems the easy way out, you will find that you have no choice but to speak the truth for God's sake. And if it happens that you have lied, you will then also discover that you have no alternative but to confess that lie and tell the truth instead. You will find that you want to do the good described in the Bible, because your heart tells you that this is what God wants you to do. And you will sincerely regret those times when you have not done what was right.

You will then know that believing in Jesus is more than idle words. You will experience that, through the Holy Spirit, your life has been given power.

**Certainty
of Faith**

There is a close connection between doing what God expects of us and the certainty of our own faith. The catechism puts it this way: "That each of us may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof." This means that you can know the tree by its fruits. "Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" (Matt. 7:16 NIV). Thus by his fruits you will be able to recognize a believer. You could see that Onesimus was a believer because he returned to his master. On his return journey he was not angry and resentful but glad that he could do God's will. He knew that if he did not, he would not have peace.

It is the same for us. If we do not do what God wants us to do, we will never enjoy peace. We will not be able to pray. The apostle Peter once said that men who are not considerate of their wives are hindered in their prayers (I Peter 3:7). The fact that they are inconsiderate with regard to their wives stands between them and God. They must first straighten this out before they can approach God again.

Similarly, no person who knowingly does something wrong, can live in harmony with God. But all those who do good, no matter how much other people ridicule them, are glad and content in the knowledge that they have peace with God.

The Meaning for Others

Doing what God wants us to do makes a great impact on our fellowmen. People often say degrading things about the church: Christians can't be trusted; they are dishonest and discourteous; they are greedy and hypocritical. It has always been this way. The apostle Peter mentions that his fellow believers were frequently accused of wrong by those outside the church (I Peter 2:12). The early church was persecuted because its members were said to be enemies of the human race. They were accused of committing monstrosities during their meetings, even resorting to cannibalism.

We cannot deny the fact that Christians often do things that are in conflict with Christ's teachings. Such behavior is harmful for the church as a whole. A minister who makes the most powerful sermons in the world but in no ways lives up to what he says, cannot be expected to have much influence on his listeners, much less on the world outside. Christians who contribute a great deal of time and effort to evangelization, yet show little love in their daily life, have an adverse effect on evangelization.

Onesimus, on the other hand, was a good evangelist. Upon his return, other slaves undoubtedly said: "Have you heard about Onesimus? He came back!—of his own free will!" They must have asked him why. Onesimus could then bring them the gospel: "It was better to be a slave with God than a freeman without." From his conduct, the other slaves knew he spoke the truth. When our faith is evident in what we do it has a magnetic quality, attracting others.

Having faith evident in what we do should begin in childhood. The boy scouts' slogan is to do a good deed each day. It might be a problem, however, to organize your day in such a way that you can say "Well, that was my good deed for the day." What you can do, though, is begin each day in prayer and ask God that He will let you live in such a way that you will glorify Him. Then people will not be able to say that Christians do not live up to what they stand for.

The Reverse

What if your life does not give evidence of your faith at all? Can you still say that you really believe and will be saved? Those who began the Reformation were accused by the Roman Catholics of teaching that lifestyle didn't really matter—in the long run you would get to heaven anyway.

Of course Luther and Calvin never taught that. In fact, the catechism says just the reverse: "No unchaste person, idolator, adulterer, thief, covetous

man, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or any such like, shall inherit the kingdom of God." True, the Lord Jesus had compassion on the woman who had committed adultery, but He also said to her: "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11 NIV).

Jesus sent His disciples to pagans and tax collectors. But when a church member persists in sin, he is to be considered as a pagan or a tax collector; that is, he must be excluded from the kingdom of heaven.

A child of God can fall into sin, but that child can never continue to live in sin.

For Adults

The catechism has frequently been criticized for the following phrase: "That each of us may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof." It has been said that whenever a believer examines his life, he is always conscious of many sins. That is why he must not base the surety of faith on his own deeds but on the promises of God's Word. It is undoubtedly true that we must not believe in ourselves or in anything we do, but only in Jesus Christ and in His completed work of redemption.

But it is also true that, even though we may know God's promises to be true, we are occasionally troubled by doubt—doubt that asks whether we really belong to Jesus Christ.

There may be different reasons for that doubt. It could be caused by one-sided preaching stressing the fact that only a few will be saved and that those few must receive a special sign from God assuring their redemption.

Doubt can also occur as a result of a life of sin. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba, it was not likely that he could sing praises to the glory of God. Instead, he had to pray: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Ps. 51:12 NIV). David had lost this joy. The absence of fruits in our lives should make us question whether the root is still alive. The presence of fruit in our lives makes us exceedingly grateful to God who gave them. It can also be said this way. Certainty of faith is a work of God through the Holy Spirit; but that Spirit becomes grieved and certainty is shaken wherever there are no fruits of gratitude.

On the Textbook

1. Who was Onesimus? What was his master's name?
2. What made this escaped slave go back to his master?
3. Would it have been possible for Onesimus to stay in Rome, and not go back?
4. According to the catechism, who is "renewing us after His image"?
5. What does it mean, to be renewed after the image of Christ? Do we become sinless, like He was?
6. What do our good works say to God?
7. How does Christ make you able to do good works?
8. What does doing good works (or not doing them) tell about yourself?
9. What message is sent to the world by Christians' good works?
10. Are you too young to live a Christian life? Do you need to learn more before you can live a Christian life? What keeps us from living that way when we are young?
11. What did the Roman Catholics say about the reformers during the time of the Reformation? What does the catechism really say about that?

On the Bible

1. Read John 15:1-17. What comparison does Jesus use to speak about believers living fruitful lives? What does it mean if we "bear much fruit" (v. 5)? Who gets the credit for our fruit? What will happen if you do not "remain in Jesus"? How can you remain "in Jesus' love" (vss. 10, 12)?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-15. What picture does Paul use in verses 10-12 to speak about the Christian life? What (or who) is the foundation of the Christian life? Do you ever have to doubt the foundation? What is Paul trying to teach us when he talks about the different kinds of building material people can use? What kind of test will our good works face? What kinds of material from Paul's list will survive that test? What does that mean for you?

For Discussion

1. Are we saved because we live Christian lives, or do we live Christian lives because we are saved? What's the difference? If doing good works doesn't help us to be saved, why do them?
2. Read Matthew 25:31-46. Think of some realistic, concrete things that you individually, or as a group, could do for the "least of these" His brothers. Think of ways to actually carry them out.

Lord's Day XXXIII

Illustration: **Acts 16:19-34**

Lord's Day 33 is the Lord's Day of repentance. The Bible has several unforgettable repentance stories. One of these is the story of the Old Testament king Manasseh. Another is the New Testament account of Paul and the Philippian jailer.

Who was this jailer? Was he such a thoroughly godless person that people had their doubts about him ever repenting? Most likely, he was a decent, hard-working man. As a matter of fact, he was the jailer of a prison, a position not attained overnight. To become jailer you had to be reliable and knowledgeable, with certain organizational abilities. He had a good job but whether he really loved his neighbor as much as himself was another question. He was certainly given the opportunity to show love. After all, he was regularly exposed to suffering and misery. His contact with criminals was daily, but did he choose to see them as objects to be guarded or as people? A man in his position could choose to be either a tyrant or a fellow human being. The Bible seems to indicate that the jailer did his duty—no more, no less.

There have always been people who consider their work someone else's responsibility. Remember the Germans during the second World War. "Orders are orders!"

The jailer in Philippi received an order one day. Two men who had been severely flogged, were left in his care. The clothes had been ripped from their backs, blood trickled down pathetically and they were handled like dangerous criminals.

Undoubtedly, the jailer must have asked who these men were. He must have been told that these men had been in Philippi for some time and that they had repeatedly met with a group of people by the river on the first day of the week to sing and pray. He must have also been told that they had freed a young girl from an evil spirit.

Were these men really criminals? The jailer must have had his doubts, but he had his orders. That is why he did nothing to make life easier for them. On the contrary, because he had been told to guard them carefully, he locked them in an inner

cell and fastened their feet in stocks. It was not only an uncomfortable position, but also an extremely painful one.

Knowing that these men could not possibly escape, the jailer thought he could sleep easy. But his supposition proved to be false. That night, the prison was shaken. A violent earthquake shook its very foundations. Walls crumbled, chains came loose, and the stocks came undone. God is more powerful than anything on earth.

With a sickening feeling in his stomach, the jailer awoke. In his confused panic he thought that all the prisoners had escaped. He had lost his honor! He had failed in his duty! He saw only one way out: to take his own life. He drew his sword, but now God reached out to him through a voice. A voice that shouted: "Don't harm yourself! We are all here" (Acts 16:28 NIV).

As the jailer called for lights and rushed in, he saw it was true. All the prisoners were there, together with the two that he had fastened in the stocks earlier. When he finally realized that not one of them was missing, it seemed as if he was confronted with a great power, one he could not understand. Had he ever known peace? In the presence of this power, he was keenly aware of his shortcomings. From the very bottom of his soul he called out: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30b NIV). Paul gave him a comforting response: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Acts 16:31 NIV).

That same night the jailer was converted. His life reversed. His thoughts reversed. They were no longer selfish, but turned to God and his fellow man. His deeds reversed—he washed Barnabas and Paul's wounds, took them into his home and fed them. He had become a new man.

Old Man and New Man

The catechism calls conversion the mortification of the *old man* and the quickening of the *new*. What does that mean?

Old and new do not refer to a person's age, but

to his *nature* (Eph. 4:22-24). The jailer could have been a young man, but he did have an old nature. That is to say, a sinful nature, inherited from Adam in Paradise. That old nature was selfish, giving no thought to anyone else. But the moment he was converted, the jailer's old nature died. Taking its place was the new man, the new nature. That new nature did not originate with sin in Paradise; it began with the grace earned by Jesus on the cross. On the cross Jesus paid the price for sin and earned new life for sinners. That new life is placed in our hearts by His Holy Spirit. Wherever new life begins, selfishness ends. A person can no longer be ambitious or self-centered. Instead, he begins to think of God and his neighbor. He begins to hate the things that his old nature made him do and discovers the joy that one can have in doing good.

Is This Instantaneous? Is the old nature killed that easily? Does the new nature appear instantly? If only that were true! Without a doubt, the jailer probably gave in to his old nature later, perhaps in the form of losing his temper. A converted person is still capable of doing very sinful deeds.

Think of Moses. He was a converted man. Yet during the journey through the desert, he committed a sin which prevented him from entering the promised land.

Think of Peter. Peter made the most beautiful confession of faith possible, yet shortly afterwards Jesus had to say to him: "Out of my sight, satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt. 16:23 NIV).

The old man dies off completely at the moment of our death. In heaven we cannot sin anymore. Our new nature will likewise only be fully resurrected at the moment of death. In heaven, you see, we can only do good works. This is why everyone who believes in Jesus Christ experiences conversion throughout his entire life. *Initial* conversion is followed by *daily* conversion.

When Is the Initial Conversion? The jailer was able to tell everyone exactly when he was converted. Can we all do that? Some people say they can. They insist that every believer has a special, individual conversion. If a person cannot pinpoint the exact moment of his conversion, they say that it has not taken place yet.

Curiously, the Bible itself mentions only a few of these special cases—there was Manasseh, Paul, the prison jailer, and the three thousand on the day of Pentecost.

But when was David converted? In his youth he was already a believer, and a brave one at that. In God's strength he killed the lion and the bear. Yet nowhere do we read about a specific conversion. We do read, however, that he had to fight his old nature throughout his whole life.

And when was Peter converted? When he was called by Jesus? But he could have been a believing Israelite long before that. And Peter also had a lifelong struggle against his old nature.

It is not always possible for a person to say exactly *when he was converted*. That is not necessary either. There are believing children, believing young people, and believing men and women—and not many of them are able to say exactly when they started to believe.

It is not really important. Faith is not a matter of time or place. The important fact is that you believe. Where there is faith, there is repentance. And where there is repentance there will also be an awareness of the need for daily renewal.

The Believer's Struggle There is a certain struggle to living that believers are very aware of. Jesus said: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24 NIV). Paul, painfully realizing that we suffer many defeats in life, wrote: "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members" (Rom. 7:21-23 NIV).

This is the struggle of repentance. You want to do what is right, to obey God, for only then will you truly be content. But you fail so often, and fall before you know it. Such is the contrast between the old and the new man. Now this is conversion—that you never give up, that you never take sides against God but always seek to stand beside Him.

Good Works A converted person *wants* to do good works. But it is well to realize what good works are.

In his youth Luther tried to attain salvation through good works. He did not succeed though,

and no one ever will. The only way to salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Good works in the Roman Catholic church could be of a peculiar nature. You could chastise yourself. You could live in chastity or poverty. Pilgrimages were highly recommended. Burning a candle in front of a statue was also commendable. Frequent repetition of a certain prayer was considered approved good work. These are all works which the Bible does not mention.

Other people see good works as specific deeds, such as visiting the sick, helping the poor or bringing the gospel to heathens. These are certainly good works, but they are not exclusive. If they were, it would mean that many people would never get around to doing a good work.

There are many good works. When a wife takes care of her husband and children, that is a good work. When an employer treats his employees fairly or a merchant deals with his clients honestly, that is a good work. When a child tries his best at school and is courteous to others, that is a good work.

Most of us live ordinary, unexceptional, lives. So it is that most of our good works are ordinary, not exceptional. To qualify as good works, though, they have to be done in the way mentioned by the catechism.

From true faith—that means that in our good works we love the Lord Jesus.

According to God's law—that means that we ask God what is good or bad.

To His glory—that means we do not perform good works for our own glory, but for His.

Not based on our own opinions or the precepts of men—that means that we do not invent good works ourselves on the assumption that God will agree.

It would seem difficult, after reading that list, to do a good work. Perfect good works, flawless works, are beyond our reach. But there is a big difference between making the effort and achieving *something* and giving up and achieving absolutely *nothing*.

For Adults In the eighteenth century, many Christian people placed a somewhat sickly emphasis on the moment of repentance. This was approximately two centuries after the Reformation and the power and faith of that time had sunk down considerably. With a decline like this eating away at the church, it was understandable that some serious-minded Christians said: "It's an empty phrase to say that you are

a child of God simply because you are a baptized member of the church. Many baptized members need conversion."

In an effort to put some life back into Christianity, the Methodist movement was started in England. From Germany Pietism began spilling over into the Netherlands.

Methodism favored large assemblies where revivals were expected to take place. Attempts were made to shock people into heaven by scaring them with hell. If a person's soul was deeply stirred with emotion, he often made a decision for Christ. That moment was used later to denote the exact time of conversion. A somewhat similar method is used by the Salvation Army and the Billy Graham Crusade.

Pietism did not emphasize mass meetings, but preferred small fellowship and Bible study groups during which members bared their souls. It had to be obvious, through testimony, whether a person had experience enough of God's fellowship to be called converted. This did not take place overnight, but required a great deal of struggle and a tremendous amount of time.

Dutch pietism differed from German pietism in that the former placed great emphasis on election. Being converted meant that you were elected. But those who were converted also felt they needed a sign of assurance from God, the One who elected and rejected. Thus the mood among these people was partly one of suffering uncertainty. Said one of their leaders: "We must constantly wait in long-suffering prayer at the door of Almighty grace."

What we can appreciate about these people was the gravity with which they searched for God; rather than being satisfied with mere words, they struggled to know Him within themselves. However, their confusion with conversion and election is to be deplored.

God *calls us* to repent. If we answer His call, we need not ask: "Am I among the elect?" But we may pray: "Teach me to act according to Your will."

If we pray for grace, light and strength, God will give us His Holy Spirit. That is one of the promises found in His Word (Luke 11:9-13). Without prayer, a conversion is worthless, but with prayer, it is good in God's sight.

On the Textbook

1. What is this Lord's Day about?
2. Is it likely that the Philippian warden was a terrible sinner?
3. Why were Paul and Silas sent to prison?

4. What happened that night? What was the warden about to do?
5. What happened? How did the warden show that his life "had been turned around"?
6. What is the "old man"? What is the "old nature"?
7. What is the "new man"? What is the "new nature"?
8. Do we still sin after we have put on the "new man"?
9. When will the "old man" really and finally be put to death? (Check LD 16, Q & A 42.)
10. What follows "initial conversion"? What does that mean for you, right now?
11. Can you tell the class when you were converted? If you can't does that mean that really you aren't converted?
12. Do you struggle with sin? Does that say anything about whether you are converted?
13. Is it important that you live a Christian life, or "do good works"? If you say "Yes," are you agreeing with what the Roman Catholic church teaches about good works?
14. Are you able to do good works? Do you do them? Why should you want to do good works?
15. List the four points used by Q & A 91 to evaluate "what we do that is good."

On the Bible

1. Read 2 Chronicles 33:1-20. What did Manasseh do to show that he didn't really love the Lord? How could he have known that he was sinning (v. 8b)? When the Lord spoke to them, what did Manasseh and the people do (v. 10)? How did the Lord humble Manasseh? What did Manasseh do to show that his heart had been turned to the Lord?
2. Read Romans 7:14-25. Does Paul speak as an unconverted sinner, or as a converted sinner? What is he describing? Do you find the same thing happening in your own life? Do we have an excuse for our sin, according to Paul's words in verse 20? Read what Paul says in chapter 8:1-4. How do we, who still struggle with sin, meet the righteous requirements of the law?

For Discussion

1. Can unbelievers do good works? Doesn't it seem as if they do? What does Q & A 91 say about this possibility?
2. "According to Romans 10:9, 10, I don't have to worry about doing good works, or living an obedient life, or even believing what the church confesses. All I have to do is to believe that Jesus is Lord, and that God raised Him from the dead." What do you think?

Lord's Day XXXIVa

Illustration:

Exodus

19:10-25

The vast desert stretches out from the foot of Mount Sinai. Three million people camp here. As far as the eye can see there are tents, people, children, sheep, goats, camels and cattle.

A man slowly descends Mount Sinai—an old man, a grey beard. But his back is straight as an arrow and his eyes glow with the power of a strong spirit. At the foot of the mountain, a group of men are assembled, waiting for him. They are the elders of the people and Moses, the old man, will tell them everything God has commanded him to speak. For it was on Mount Sinai that he spoke with God Himself.

Moses tells them: "In three days the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Remember that He is a holy God. Let no one climb the mountain or touch it, for it will be holy ground. Whoever disobeys will be stoned or shot with arrows. Only when the ram's horn sounds may they go up to the mountain."

These commands are passed throughout the camp. Everyone hears that the Almighty God, who has led them out of Egypt, and whom no eye has ever seen, will come down and speak to them.

Moses consecrates the people and they all wash their clothes. They desire to do what God asks and wait for three days in fear, trembling and great expectation.

The third day dawns. A thick cloud smudges the mountain. There is thunder and lightning and a very loud trumpet blast. In holy awe the people gaze. Raising his staff, Moses beckons the people to follow him. All the tribes of Israel approach and stand at the foot of the holy mountain of God. Smoke billows thick, and the mountain trembles. The sound of the trumpet increases.

Moses then speaks to the Lord. We do not know what he says but the Lord answers him. He has descended on Sinai and calls Moses into His presence.

After Moses has climbed up, he is reminded once again that no one, not even the priests of Israel, is to climb the mountain. So Moses went

down to the people to warn them once more.

Then the Lord spoke to Israel. The trumpet blasts and thunder are nothing in comparison with the awe that His voice inspires. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex. 20:2 NIV). The Ten Commandments are spoken next, the same commandments that are read to us in church.

God Is Holy

What do the Ten Commandments mean? If we fully understand why the Lord gave us His commandments in this awe-inspiring way, they should fill us with great respect for His holiness.

His holiness is most perfectly evident in heaven. Heaven is the place where seraphs (holy angels) stand before the throne of God. In Isaiah we read that they cover their faces and feet with wings, all the while calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3 NIV).

God's holiness should also be evident on earth, especially among His own people. They may not treat Him as though He were like them, in a neighborly fashion. God is highly exalted above all human beings. He is so great and awesome, that it is beyond us. He is a holy God who abhors sin and pours out His wrath upon it. He cannot ever tolerate it. He curses sin and has pronounced His sacred judgment upon it to all eternity.

These are things we may never forget. If you want to have communion with God you must also be holy. The words spoken by God reminded the people of His holiness. They were to keep His commandments, for through them their lives would be made holy.

God Is Gracious

Was Israel a holy nation? Would they be able to keep God's law? The journey through the desert would soon prove that they could not.

Their complaints were bitter and rarely stopped.

How then could a holy God speak to such a sinful people? The only reason He could speak with them is because He is a *gracious* God; a God who, incomprehensibly, is Himself willing to give what He asks. At Sinai He made a *covenant* with this sinful nation, a nation He had *elected* of His own free will. That covenant was not based on Israel's holiness, but on God's grace. That is why it is known as the *covenant of grace*.

That grace is evident in God's opening words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex. 20:2 NIV). These words indicate that God's achievements, not Israel's, are first and foremost in this covenant. Egypt, the land of slavery, mirrored that land of slavery known as sin. As Israelites were slaves in Egypt, so people are slaves to sin, through their own doing. But the Lord redeems His people from the power of sin. Not through any works of their own but only through His grace. This is why blood was sprinkled on the people (Ex. 24), signifying the blood of reconciliation. Protected by that blood, which testified to Jesus Christ, they will be able to continue as partners in God's covenant of grace.

The Law of the Covenant of Grace

This is all very difficult to understand. On the one hand, we learn that the Lord wants a sinless, holy people, people who are supposed to obey His law. On the other, the Lord takes a sinful nation to be His and forgives them their sins, even though He knows that they will go on sinning time and again.

How can both premises be true? Was Israel required to keep the law because God is a holy God? Or was Israel permitted to ignore the law, because God is a gracious God?

It stands to reason that they could not ignore the law. They were to pray earnestly for strength to keep the law. And yet, if through weakness they fell into sin, they were assured that they need not despair. The faithful covenant God would never forsake them.

It is still so today. We still have a covenant of grace; a covenant which the holy God made with sinners. Through that covenant He has also accepted the children of believers into His fellowship. That is why they are baptized. The water of baptism tells them that the Lord will always forgive them their sins. But their part in that covenant is to love Him and keep His commandments.

To enable them to do this, He has sent His Holy Spirit. Whoever prays for the Holy Spirit, will

receive the Holy Spirit. Strengthened by Him, the believer will not see God's commandments as a harsh, iron-clad law; rather, he will recognize the beauty of these commandments and pray that God will give him a holy life in accordance with His will.

Are the Ten Commandments Still Valid?

Are we still required to keep this Old Testament law given to Israel? Many Old Testament commandments were fulfilled by Jesus Christ. The laws governing the tabernacle and the temple, the laws of sacrifices and feasts, were all completed in Jesus Christ who brought the ultimate sacrifice. And when this sacrifice was completed, the temple curtain was rent from top to bottom.

But that was the *ceremonial* law. This did not mean that the New Testament children of God had nothing to do with God's law anymore. Even Jesus kept the law of His heavenly Father. In the Sermon on the Mount, He clearly showed that the Ten Commandments had a much deeper meaning than one might initially suppose. His disciples were required to obey and keep that meaning. It is not enough that we do not kill; we may not even be angry with a brother. It is not enough that we not commit adultery; we may not even look lustfully at the wife of a neighbor.

Jesus has summarized the Ten Commandments as follows: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:37-40 NIV).

These two commandments envelop all the commandments God's own hand wrote on the stone tables at Sinai.

Israelite Form

The form in which the Ten Commandments were given to Israel shows that they were first of all intended for Israel itself. This is why we must differentiate between the *temporary* form and the *permanent* which remains valid for us.

Immediately noticeable is that all the commandments forbid. Throughout them the refrain echoes: "Thou shalt *not*." It seems as though little children are being addressed—little children who still have a lot to learn. In view of the fact that as a nation of God, the people of Israel were still in infancy, this was not so strange.

Only later would God, through His Spirit, write His law on the hearts of His people (Heb. 8:10), and then the emphasis would fall on what they might do, rather than on what they might not do.

The typical Jewish nature of the law can be found especially in the fourth, fifth and tenth commandments. The fourth deals with the sabbath which was replaced by Sunday in the New Testament. It also speaks of "the alien within" Israel's gates. The fifth commandment speaks of "the land which the Lord your God will give you"; in other words, the land of Canaan. The tenth commandment refers, among other things, to the cattle belonging to one's neighbor, words which remind us of Israel's communal and agrarian lifestyle.

The introduction to the commandments, which reminds the people of Israel of their exodus from slavery out of the land of Egypt, is actually the reference most indicative of the Jewish nature of the law.

The Two Tables

The Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God.

That is to say, His almighty power inscribed them on two tables of stone. Moses threw those tables onto the rocks breaking them to pieces when he saw Israel's idolatry before the golden calf. Afterwards he received two new tables, again written by God. He read these to the people with a veiled face.

Jesus later summarized the law in two commandments. On the basis of His words, we assume that the first table was concerned with love for God and the second with love for one's neighbor.

The first four commandments speak of God Himself; His service, His name and His day. The last six commandments concern our relationship with our parents, our neighbors, our attitude toward marriage, our neighbors' property, toward our neighbors themselves, and the matter of coveting things that belong to our neighbors.

The first commandment introduces all the others, for it described the Lord as the one and only God.

The tenth commandment touches our soul, for it tells us that we must serve Him with our hearts.

For Adults

Sometimes it seems as if Paul wanted to abolish the law. In Romans 3:20 he wrote: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by ob-

Paul and the Law

-serving the law" (NIV), and in Galatians 3:24 and 25: "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (NIV).

What did Paul mean? Paul wanted to verbally oppose the idea still accepted by Pharisees and many converted Jews, that a person could obtain righteousness through the law. This was not possible. It would make the law the old covenant of works again. We are not able to live as Adam did in Paradise, capable of fulfilling God's commandments. It is only through Jesus Christ that we can be saved.

Paul did not seek to do away with the law. He called the law a "taskmaster" leading us to Christ. This means that the law can perform a tremendous service for us, in that it makes us aware of our need for Christ. It shows us clearly that we are not capable of keeping it perfectly, compelling us to flee to Christ for our salvation.

Paul, therefore, did not mean that the law no longer had any use. He presented the law as the law of the covenant of grace which Christians were to keep to the best of their ability. Notice, for example, his emphasis on the fifth commandment: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise—'that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.'" (Eph. 6:1-3 NIV).

The Division of the Commandments

Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans blend the first two commandments into one and divide the tenth into two. Accordingly these two denominations assume that the first table of the law had three commandments, and the second table, seven.

This cannot be accepted. The first and second commandments deal with two distinct sins—idolatry and image worship—while the tenth addresses only one—covetousness. By merging the first two, the impact of the second commandment—which forbids image worship—loses its force for the Roman Catholics.

On the Textbook

1. What is the setting of Exodus 19:10-25? Where is Israel on their journey?
2. What is the Lord telling Israel in the way they are commanded to prepare themselves for His descending from Mount Sinai?
3. What do we mean when we confess that God is "holy"?
4. If God cannot stand sin, how could God speak to Israel?
5. What does Exodus 20:1 say about the foundation of the covenant? Does it still say something to you, many years later?
6. What was foreshadowed by the sprinkled blood of Exodus 24:8? (Check Hebrews 10:22, 1 Peter 1:2, and 1 Corinthians 11:25.)
7. Do God's grace and mercy cancel out the demands of God's holiness and justice, namely obedience to His law?
8. Does God have a covenant with you? How do you know that for certain?
9. What do the words "ceremonial law" mean?
10. Are we still expected to obey the Ten Commandments?
11. List some of the ways that you can tell that the Ten Commandments were meant first of all for the Israelites.
12. What is the "first table of the law"? And the "second table"?

On the Bible

1. Read Matthew 5:21-43. Have you ever killed anyone? Does that mean you have never broken the commandment, "You shall not kill"? Is there anyone who has obeyed the commandments in thought, word, and deed? Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Is Jesus in Matthew 5 saying something that Israel had never heard before? Or is He repeating what Moses had really meant all the time?
2. Read Matthew 23:34-40. These are the "great commandments." Did Jesus "make up" this summary of the law? Or did He get it from somewhere else? (Check Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19.) Is it easier to obey the two great commandments, or the whole Ten Commandments? Some people think that the summary is "the law of love," whereas the Ten Commandments represent "legalism" (check your dictionary). Is this a good distinction? Is there a contrast between the two?

For Discussion

1. "I love God, but I will serve Him in my own way. The Ten Commandments were for Israel. They aren't for the church." Have you ever felt this way, or heard someone talk like this? Check Romans 13:8-14 and John 14:15, 21. Now discuss how people your age are tempted to disobedience to God's law. Go through each commandment, and then think of ways you can be obedient to each one.

Lord's Day XXXIVb

Illustration: II Kings 2

Idols! What are they? Actually, the word idol means a form, or apparition. It is a god which does not exist, at least not as a deity. Yet even things which do not exist can exercise great influence. If someone tells you a horror story and afterwards you walk home in the dark as the wind howls through the trees, you can begin to feel pretty nervous. Imagination and fantasy can get the better of you to the point where nothing else matters.

A case in point was King Ahaziah, Ahab's son. He had fallen through the lattice of his upper room and injured himself so badly that it seemed he would die. But his thoughts did not turn to God, the only One who was able to heal him. The Almighty God, who commanded both rain and drought (as he had seen in his father's time), was the farthest thing from his mind. Instead, Ahaziah turned to something that did not exist—an idol. That idol was called Baal-Zebub, and he was worshipped by Israel's enemies, the Philistines, in Ekron.

Baal-Zebub literally means: lord of the flies. But what could this lord of the flies do for a sick person? Perhaps he would keep these troublesome insects out of the king's room. Ahaziah was certain though, that Baal-Zebub could forecast the future. Flies could predict certain atmospheric conditions, swarms of them indicating a change of weather. That is why he sent some messengers, probably with expensive presents, to Ekron to ask Baal-Zebub if he would recover.

One might conclude that, if Ahaziah was gullible enough to believe nonsense like this, that was his business; certainly God, the all-powerful God of heaven and earth, would not pay any attention to him. But that is not true. God, who wants to be everything for His people, is deeply offended when He sees His people place their faith in an idol. In fact, He was so offended that He interceded. First He sent His servant Elijah to meet Ahaziah's messengers and say: " 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?' Therefore this is what the Lord says: 'You will not leave the bed you are

lying on. You will certainly die!' " (I Kings 1:3 and 4 NIV).

Ahaziah, entrapped by his idolatry, foolishly decided to fight the Lord. He sends out soldiers, in companies of fifty, to kill the prophets. Twice fire came down from heaven and consumed these men. This was to show Israel that there was only one true God. The third officer and his soldiers were spared a similar fate because the officer showed respect for the servant of God, and Elijah willingly accompanied him back to the palace. He was not afraid, for he knew that his life was in the hand of Almighty God. At the palace, he told the king that he would die. Then he left the palace unharmed.

The Sin of Idolatry

It would be a sin if you were ashamed of your own parents; if you felt they were too ordinary, too uneducated. It would be terrible if you tried to find a richer, more cultured set of parents. You would be a disgraceful child.

People who served idols are disgraceful children of God. There is only one God. He created everything and holds everything in His hand. Without Him, neither man nor animal can exist. Without Him, you cannot speak.

Yet there are people who say, "God doesn't concern me; He is too far away and He does nothing for me. I prefer to worship something else; something more meaningful and helpful to me!"

When pagans say this, it is bad enough. Their knowledge of God, which was present in the roots of their past, has been corrupted. But when Christians or people in Christian environments say it, it is much worse. They anger God, for He wants to be served and honored by His creatures. If they refuse, He is deeply offended and will let them know.

Why Do People Choose Idols? Every form of idolatry involves a choice. When people consciously choose an idol, they also consciously reject the only true God.

Why do they do this? They do it because by nature they are inclined to hate God. They don't want to exist for God; they want a god who will exist for them. They are outraged when they hear that God will punish them and everyone else for sin, feeling they have done nothing to deserve punishment. They also think they have a much better solution in the form of idols. These can give them pleasure, heal them, (as Ahaziah hoped), give them a good harvest, healthy children and victory over enemies. They have idols for every possible situation and ascribe to them power—power that they will use for their own ends.

If idols did not live up to what was expected of them, people became angry. One king ordered the images of his idols whipped because they failed to meet his expectations.

Israel and the Idols The people of Israel lived in the midst of nations who served idols. Jacob came into contact with idols through Rachel. On the journey through the desert idols proved to be a temptation (Acts 6:43), and when Israel later occupied the land of Canaan it repeatedly resorted to idolatry.

It was not until after the exile that the Jews, having paid heavily for past sins, began to avoid idolatry. But the history of Israel contains a warning for us. It is easy for God's people, a people to whom God has revealed Himself as the only true God, to keep falling back into idolatry. We also know that our own hearts often want more things than God gives us. At times such as these, we would prefer to close the Bible and do what we want. That is the border of idolatry.

The Great Tempter The one who tempts people into idolatry is the devil himself, and he showed this clearly when he tried to tempt Jesus in the desert. He asked Jesus to fall down and worship him, promising in return power over all the kingdoms of the earth. Temptation can be defined as an enticing promise in exchange for repudiating God. Jesus triumphed over temptation, and those who love Him will also receive the strength to overcome temptations.

The apostle Paul later gave a very clear definition of idolatry: "Therefore, my dear friends, flee

from idolatry . . . do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons" (I Cor. 10:14, 19 and 20 NIV).

People create their own idols. Satan exploits such idolatrous creations and uses them to lead people further away from God and closer to him. This knowledge should all the more compel us to bring the gospel to those who do not know God.

Modern Idols We do not sacrifice to Baal or Astarte any longer; nor do we worship Artemis, Zeus, Wotan or Thor. Does that mean that we no longer have idols?

If we keep in mind that idolatry is the failure to recognize God as the Almighty Being, and the invention of something to take His place, then we will see that there is still a great deal of idolatry in the world. A man can turn his car into an idol when it becomes more important to him than anything else. A teenager can do the same thing with a motorcycle and a girl can literally worship her appearance. A father or mother can idolize their children and vice versa. People have also created universal idols. Germans used to greet each other with "Heil Hitler!" and many genuinely believed that Hitler would bring about their salvation. The Russians did the same with Lenin and Stalin and many people still see communism as a new gospel.

Time and again people have expected great things from man. What they expected, though, is something they should have expected only from God.

The Triumph of Idolatry A person can triumph over idolatry only through his faith in Jesus Christ, for He has defeated the devil and has revealed God as our Father. If we love Jesus we may freely go to the Father and He will always take care of us. We will never again have to be afraid of anything. Even when we are ill, God will care for us, and the important thing will not be whether we recover, but that He always remains with us. If war breaks out, the most important thing is not whether we conquer but only that *His* kingdom may come and that we are part of it. If God is our Father, our lives, everywhere and always, will be blessed.

For Adults

Our age crawls with superstition. Superstition can be defined as a person's belief in something (eg. a charm or omen) outside of God's providence.

Some people fear numbers. There are hotels which eliminate the thirteenth floor, because there are those who will not rent a room with the number 13 on it. Other people are afraid of omens. They will not light a match with three people because this will invite disaster, nor will they walk under a ladder. Others "knock on wood" fearing their good luck might change radically if they did not. Cars are alive with mascots and people stroke rabbit's feet at football games. Magazines regularly feature articles about "what the stars foretell." Astrology boosts circulation. Soothsayers and palm readers still exist, albeit in the form of cards and tea-leaves.

Spiritualism is also blossoming. Seances and Ouija boards flourish. People try to convey and record messages from spirits of the deceased.

Thousands upon thousands of people are addicted to superstition. It is not an innocent phenomenon. It is, in fact, a denial and rejection of the one true God who governs all things and without whose will no creature can move. Superstition corrupts man's heart. Instead of contentment, there is fear; instead of certainty, doubt. It allows the devil access to their souls.

We must always resist superstition, exposing it for the evil it is.

On the Textbook

1. What does the word "idol" mean?
2. Can people be influenced by things that don't exist, or by things that don't really have any power? How?
3. What was King Ahaziah's idol?
4. What did God do about King Ahaziah's idolatry?
5. How can disowning parents be like worshipping idols?
6. What is the real reason that people turn to idols?
7. How does Paul define idols and idolatry?
8. List four of the idols mentioned in the book. Add four more that you thought of. Do any idols live inside the church?
9. How can a person triumph over idolatry?
10. Do you agree that God can bless you even though, for example, your country loses a war?

On the Bible

1. Read Hebrews 13:5, 6. The author mentions a very powerful idol in these verses. What is the antidote or remedy for this kind of idolatry (vss. 5b, 6)? What did Christ say about this kind of idolatry? Check Matthew 6:21, 24, 32-34. Does this mean that we should try to stay poor? Do poor people have any trouble with this idolatry? Compare 1 Timothy 6:6-10. Does Paul know what life is really like? Do these things really happen?
2. Read Isaiah 44:6-22. The Lord is poking fun at someone. Who is it? What form is given to the idol (v. 13)? Compare that to Genesis 1:26-27. What does that say about the one making the idol? What is it that deludes the idol-worshipper (v. 20)? Does the form of the idol give us a clue as to who is really being worshipped? What does it tell you?

For Discussion

1. Are there any idols in your life? If that is too personal, ask yourself whether people your age are tempted to idolize anything. What kinds of things? Why is it so hard to identify your own idols? Why is it so hard to give them up?
2. Under the section entitled "For Adults," the book speaks about superstition in our day. Are you superstitious? Do you think people in our society are? Do you feel funny when a black cat crosses your path, or when you walk under a ladder? Do you think that the book comes down too hard on things like horoscopes, Ouija boards, and similar things? Does anyone take them seriously?

Lord's Day XXXV

Illustration: **Exodus 32**

The second commandment concerns the *worship of images*. The strange thing is not that people make images, but that they worship them.

Isaiah, outraged at seeing people manufacture and worship images, ridiculed this once: "He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god." They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand" (Isa. 44:14-18 NIV).

Isaiah's words are sharp and expose the worship of images in all of its folly. But the sin remained and is still with us today.

The worship of images had been with Israel since its beginning. Think back to Mount Sinai. Remember God's proclamation of the law and the events that immediately followed. The people were gathered in front of Mount Sinai, holy with God's presence, waiting for Moses to return. Because the hours turned into days, the people became impatient, and that impatience soon turned into boredom.

When a teacher leaves the classroom for a lengthy time period, the students get restless. They leave their desks and start wandering around. Soon order has gone, and chaos has appeared.

Comparatively speaking, Israel did the same thing. Boredom had set in and they relished the thought that Moses could not forbid them anymore. They could not resist the temptation to do what they had always wanted to do. They wanted a religion that was just a bit more human. Not a God who was far away, untouchable, mighty and awe-

inspiring, but one they could see, one of their own liking, one who would give them permission to have some fun.

So "they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' " (Ex. 32:1 NIV). Aaron responded like a weakling, not having the nerve to say to the people confronting him: "Over my dead body." Fear compelled him to agree. Perhaps he thought: "They won't want to go through with this when they find out how much it will cost them." So he said: "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me" (Ex. 32:2 NIV).

But contrary to his expectations, the people were perfectly prepared to give him all the gold he wanted, excited by the break in their monotonous existence. Aaron had now committed himself, and could no longer turn back. He cast a golden calf, possibly in the fashion that Egyptians had done. "Then they said: 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt'" (Ex. 32:4 NIV).

Imagine comparing God to a calf! Possibly Aaron wanted to compare the power of God with the strength of a young bull, but even comparing this single attribute of God with that of an animal was a dreadful sin, a terrible insult.

The people were pleased and quick to sacrifice to and honor this calf god. Whipped into a frenzy by their excitement and disobedience, they broke into singing and dancing. They had created their own god—a god that pleased them—a god who let them do what they wanted. But their gold calf was ground to powder when Moses returned and they were punished. In a single day, about three thousand Israelites were put to death.

How Did Israel Lapse into Image Worship With the exception of Persia, the entire near-Eastern world worshipped images. Jacob's wife, Rachel, had stolen some of her father's images (teraphim). These were later buried by Jacob in Bethel (Gen. 35:4).

In Egypt, where the people of Israel had lived for four hundred years, there were many images—human bodies with heads of eagles, falcons, monkeys, cows and many other animals. Canaan had so-called Asheras, sacred wooden poles which people worshipped. It is not surprising, therefore, that the people of Israel were contaminated with desire to have gods they could see and touch.

What Was Behind It? What motivated the pagans to depict their gods by means of images, mainly animals? You might as well ask what motivates people today to use mascots in cars, or in sports. What incites people in Eastern Europe to carry large portraits of communist leaders in their marches.

The reason for all of this lies in the fact that people like to be able to see and touch the things they trust. We all enjoy looking at pictures of parents and grandparents, people we love. Someone who travels a lot carries a picture of his loved ones with him. This brings them a bit closer to his heart.

Similarly, people who do not know the one true God, want to see and touch their gods, so that they can be assured of their presence. However, this can easily go too far. They may also be tempted to think that the image not only represents their god but also that it contains some divine attribute. Thus the image itself becomes a god and has power. So they worship it, whether it is made of wood or stone.

All these practices are in absolute conflict with worshipping God. The worship of images is sacrilegious, not religious, and it often borders on the ridiculous.

The Consequences The results of this foolish image worship are described by Paul in his epistle to the Romans. He wrote that the pagans have exchanged the glory of immortal God for images made to look like mortal man, birds, animals and reptiles. "Therefore," he continued, "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity

for the degrading of their bodies with one another" (Rom. 1:24 NIV). By degrading God, they also degraded themselves. He who worships animals is himself likely to acquire bestial qualities.

When Israel began dancing around the golden calf, all restraints of decency and propriety were thrown to the wind. Likewise, the people of Ephesus, home of Artemus whose image was believed to have fallen from heaven, practiced unrestrained immorality as part of their religious temple service. These people did not live to the glory of God, but for their own pleasure. This is the danger in any *self-willed religion*, a religion created for the people's pleasure, that they only live according to their own wishes.

Self-Willed Religion At Sinai, the Israelites chose to serve God in their own way.

Later, Jeroboam, king of the northern part of Israel, did the same when he made two golden calves. The Bible says that he made Israel to sin. To all appearances the people seemed to worship the same God as in Jerusalem—they just worshipped in a slightly different fashion. Yet this corrupted all of Israel. People who do not take the worship of God seriously, are not apt to take life too seriously.

God wants to be served the way He specified in the Bible. We must always remember this. Some people say they want to serve God, but will not go to church. They argue that the church cannot give them salvation, forgetting that Jesus said that He would build His church on Peter's confession and that the gates of Hades would not triumph over that church (Matt. 16:18 NIV).

There are those who would rather listen to the radio on Sunday than go to church, that is, come together with God. Other people find church services boring. They want the services to be more attractive and exciting. If movies were shown regularly, churches would be crowded, they say.

But the guideline for the service of God can be found only in His Word, and we are not allowed to go outside of that Word. If we did, we would eventually end up like the Roman Catholic church, where images and murals, stained glass windows and many other ornaments please the senses, but do little justice to the Word of God. We must never forget that "God is Spirit and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24 NIV).

What Do the Roman Catholics Say About Images?

Roman Catholics say that they do not really worship images but that they honor the deceased saints represented by these images. In reality, however, they attribute miracles to these images. They say tears were shed by an image of Mary. Prayer made in the presence of some image has more power. They also give indulgences to anyone who visits a holy place boasting the image of a saint.

Images are also said to be books for the laity. Laymen, in contrast to clergy, are ordinary people who have very little knowledge about the Bible and will, therefore, learn from an image.

The Bible, however, does not differentiate between clergy and laity. All believers are prophets, priests and kings (Lord's Day 12) and all can know of their salvation from the Word of God.

Are Images Sinful?

Sculpting is a gift of God, and He has given some a large measure of this gift. In Exodus 31:1-11 we hear about Bezalel and Oholiab, craftsmen. In Exodus 37:6-9 and II Chronicles 4:3-4 we learn that images were also found in the tabernacle and the temple. God wants us to use our talents and any Christian artist should ask how he can best serve God and his neighbor with the gift he has received. It is the height of folly, though, to think that God can be depicted through images. How indeed could man, in earthly form, represent the eternal and omnipresent God? No matter how beautifully or cunningly crafted, art may never take the place of God's revelation. We have to be satisfied with His Word, which is able to meet all of our needs.

For Adults

We can distinguish three different types of worship services: *personal* worship, *family* worship, and *public* worship.

Personal worship is making the reading of the Bible and praying a personal habit. We all need to know our way in the Bible. It must have priority over all the other books we read and we must read it frequently. There is other Christian literature available, including books that will help us understand the Bible. There are also publications that will serve that purpose. (Do you subscribe to a Christian magazine?) It is also vital that we begin and end each day with prayer, constantly praising God as the most important thing in our lives.

Family worship consists of praying and reading the Bible together as a family. The best time to do this is at meal time when the head of the house can act as priest on behalf of his family. A daily devotional book or a children's Bible can be very helpful. It is not always necessary to read an entire chapter of the Bible. It is better to focus on a unit which can be readily understood, than to read long passages that strain the attention span of those listening. It is also advisable to read the Bible in sequence, even though certain passages which were not intended for devotional reading—for example, the genealogies and certain parts of the ceremonial laws—might well be skipped.

Public worship takes place in church on Sunday. The Lord met His people Israel in the tent of meeting. Our Father, through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, now meets His people, the church, on Sunday.

In that meeting we differentiate between what God gives and what we contribute. *God* gives three things: His Word, preached by the minister; the blessing, placed upon the congregation; and the law, read to the church as the rule of gratitude.

The *congregation* contributes four things: prayer, in which the people call upon the Lord; the votum, which expresses trust in Him; the confession of faith of the church of all ages; and the offering which allows them to give.

On the Textbook

1. Why did the Israelites want to make an image?
2. How did Aaron respond? What should he have done? Why didn't he do that?
3. What image did he choose to make? Why that particular image?
4. How did Israel know about worshipping images?
5. What reason is given in the book for people's desire to use images in worship?
6. Who is more satisfied when images are used, the worshipped or the worshipper?
7. What are the consequences of the use of images?
8. What is meant by "self-willed worship"?
9. Is the church important or necessary for Christian worship?
10. How does the Roman Catholic church explain its use of images?

11. What does the catechism say about that in Q & A 98?

On the Bible

1. Read 1 Kings 12:25-33. At what time in Israel's history did this event take place? What did Jeroboam think was going to happen if all Israel would have to worship in Jerusalem? How did he convince the Israelites to worship at his shrines? What happened after the calf worship got started? Who decided how Israel should worship? Look at 1 Kings 15:26, 34; 16:26, 31; and 22:51. What were the long-term results of Jeroboam's sin?
2. Read John 4:19-26. Jesus contrasts the Old Testament worship ("in Jerusalem") with worship after the Spirit is poured out ("in spirit and in truth"). What does this mean for the place where people worship? What about the way in which people worship? Compare Old Testament worship and New Testament worship on these and any other points you can think of. Why must God's worshipper worship Him in "spirit and in truth"? Can you describe that kind of worship, or say something about what that means?

For Discussion

1. Is there any difference between the first and the second commandments? What is the difference between idols (1st commandment) and images (2nd commandment)? When Israel used the calf in its worship, was it in fact worshipping the calf? Or were they using the calf to represent something else? Should we perhaps do what Roman Catholics and Lutherans have done, and make the first two commandments into one?
2. Even if we don't paint a picture, or carve an image to represent God, might we still have images of Him? For example, what picture do you have of God in your mind when you think about Him? A grandfather? A cruel judge? A Santa Claus? Does your "picture" of God resemble what He has revealed of Himself in His Word? Is your picture of God "self-willed"?

Lord's Days XXXVI and XXXVII

Illustration: **II Samuel** **6:1-10**

The third commandment deals with blasphemy. At least that's the first thing we think of with regard to this commandment.

"Thou shalt not use the name of the Lord your God in vain." Using God's name in vain makes us think of blasphemy but it actually deals with much more. The story of Uzzah illustrates this clearly.

Who was Uzzah? He was brought up in a god-fearing family, where God's name was honored and never used in vain. People whispered as they passed his father's property: "The ark of God rests in that house." They would tell each other again how remarkable it was that the ark had come to be there. It had happened during the Philistine oppression. Times had been hard—for freedom and for religion. The sons of the high priest, Hophni and Phinehas, had desecrated the holy place. They had committed innumerable atrocities in the tabernacle itself. But they still thought that the Lord would help them in the war against the Philistines if they took the ark from the Holy of Holies, to the battlefield.

God did not work this way, though. The ark had been captured by the uncircumcised Philistines and Hophni and Phinehas had both been killed on the same day.

The Philistines' joy in capturing their enemies' God was short-lived. God was very well able to take care of His own honor. Dagon, the Philistine idol, fell on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord. God also inflicted evil plagues on the Philistines until they were finally forced to return the ark to Israel. They had put it on a new cart, drawn by two cows that had calved and had never been yoked, and had driven the animals over the border.

It was at this point that it became painfully evident just how disrespectful the Israelites had become over the years.

The ark, remember, represented God's throne. The Bible says that the ark is called by the Name of the Lord Almighty who is enthroned between the cherubim. The ark was not intended to be seen by

anyone, but was to stand behind the curtains in the Holy of Holies. No one was allowed to come near it, on pain of certain death.

When the ark was returned to Israel, however, people became curious. Even though they first sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord, they looked into the ark, touching it as though it were an ordinary idol.

This angered the Lord and He put seventy of the men to death as punishment for their disrespect. The people mourned in fear and wondered who could stand in the presence of the Lord. They sent messages to the nearby town of Kiriath-Jearim, asking them to take the ark off their hands. "So the men of Kiriath-Jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord. They took it to Abinadab's house" (I Sam. 7:1 NIV), where it stood for years. Abinadab's oldest son, Eleazar, was consecrated to guard the ark, and his two younger brothers, Uzzah and Ahijah, grew up very near the ark.

This nearness actually exposed them to great danger, for familiarity can breed disrespect. If you are always close to something special and beautiful, there is the danger that its uniqueness and beauty may wear off. As a matter of fact, Uzzah became so used to having the ark around that it seemed like part of his father's house. He lost the holy awe that we must feel in God's presence.

The day dawned that David had defeated all the Philistines, and that he arrived at Abinadab's house to bring the ark back to Jerusalem to restore it to a place of honor. He was accompanied by no less than thirty thousand soldiers. Uzzah and his brother were placed in charge of guiding the new cart with the ark of God on it. If they had sufficient respect for the name of the Lord, they would have transported the ark according to the instruction God Himself had given. They could have known that they were not supposed to put the ark on a cart, as the Philistines had done. The ark was to be covered with the shielding curtain, which again had to be covered with hides. This was then covered with a cloth of solid blue after which the poles were put into place. No one was to touch the holy articles or

he would die, and only Levites were to carry the ark (Numbers 4).

It did not occur to Uzzah that he was dealing with something holy. He handled the ark as he would handle anything. When the oxen stumbled, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God. At that same moment, God struck him down and he died there beside the ark. He had committed an irreverent act and God will not hold him guiltless who uses His name in vain.

Vain Use What exactly is "vain use"? The word "vain" actually means empty, or worthless, having no real value. When we use God's name in vain, we forget that God is a holy God demanding our deepest respect. God's name, in effect, is His revelation of Himself. The ark of God with the cherubim also revealed something about God. It revealed His holiness, a holiness so immense that sinners could only approach God through the blood of atonement. Without that blood, God's presence would be dangerous for them.

These were things that Uzzah had forgotten. His act was an irreverent one and he was punished accordingly. Israel's God was a holy God.

Where Do We Find God's Name? We no longer have an ark, but we are still invited to come to a place where the name of God is proclaimed. That happens when the church meets and God Himself is present. He asks our respect. There is only one way that we can come to God. Not through the priestly sacrifice of animals, but in the name of our great high priest Jesus, who has reconciled us through His blood. If we go to God in Jesus' name, we may confidently approach Him—but also with deep respect. The moment we become empty or superficial in God's house, we violate the third commandment. If we sing or say a prayer without reverence, merely mouthing the words, we use God's name in vain. If we fool around during the sermon, we not only offend other people, but also use God's name in vain.

Of course, outside the church we can also use the name of God in vain. If we read the Bible, pray, or do anything that involves the name of God without reverence, we use His name in vain.

Profanity For some people profanity is normal. They mock the Bible, twisting a word around here and there, taking it out of context. They treat the Word of God without respect. This is cheap humor. Nothing is simpler than taking texts out of context. However, it is also a serious sin which corrupts the meaning of the Bible and desecrates the name of God which is revealed in that book.

Scoffing Scoffing is even worse. Profanity does not involve deliberate *intent* to insult God, but scoffing does.

A scoffer makes a deliberate effort to make sacred things ridiculous. Examples of scoffers were the youths from Bethel who jeered at the prophet Elijah, calling him "baldhead." These youths had been taught from childhood to worship idols and to despise Jerusalem's temple. God demonstrates that He does not hold them guiltless. Forty-two of them were mauled by two bears that came out of the woods (II Kings 2:23-24).

According to Peter, scoffers will also appear in the last days. They will try to make the Word of God appear ridiculous. In God's Word we read that Christ will return, but they will mock that idea. The return of Christ, however, will come upon them without warning, surprising them just as the flood came upon the scoffers in Noah's time.

If we are to withstand all these words, though, we will have to know the Bible thoroughly. There is a story about a young man who had been raised in a Christian family. When he left home, he found himself among youths who regularly made fun of the Bible. At first he went along with them, but soon discovered that they knew only part of the Bible. Not knowing it completely, it was easy for them to make it laughable. The boy broke with this group and began to read the Bible again. Gradually he regained his faith and his respect for God's Word. Thorough Bible knowledge will not allow scoffing.

Blasphemy Blasphemy is contempt for God. It is using God's name without any related meaning at all.

At school students are taught several different word groups, the most important of which are verbs and nouns, while words of exclamation are less important. A blasphemer uses the name of God as an exclamation, thereby reducing the name of the most high to unimportance.

While Roman Catholics consider cursing God a

great sin, they do not consider interjecting God's name into a sentence here and there very objectionable.

However, the second commandment speaks clearly, condemning the use of God's name in vain. Blasphemy is obviously vain use of His name. We must avoid it and not permit people to blaspheme in our presence or allow a blasphemer into our company. We should forbid blasphemy on all counts and request anyone who unwittingly uses the name of God lightly to be more respectful of His name.

False Oaths Sometimes a deliberate appeal is made to God's name by people even though they do not mean it. They wilfully tell a lie while under oath. In the Old Testament, Naboth was accused by false witnesses. There was also Peter who, fearing for his life, "began to call down curses on himself, and swore to them 'I don't know this man you're talking about.' " (Mark 14:71 NIV). The Lord forgave Peter, but his sin was nevertheless great.

To swear an oath is to call upon God's name in such a way that you actually ask Him to punish you if you are lying. Lying under oath, therefore, is a very serious transgression, equivalent to opening the gates of hell for yourself.

Are We Allowed to Swear an Oath? Some people say that Christians are not allowed to take oaths at all. The Anabaptists appeal directly to Jesus who said: "But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is His footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matt. 5:34-37 NIV; compare James 5:12).

Jesus seems to prohibit swearing oaths altogether. Yet we also know that Jesus Himself swore an oath before the justice seat of Caiaphas. Moreover, in Hebrews 6:16-17, we read: "Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath" (NIV).

Other believers in the Bible also swore oaths, raising the question of what Jesus meant when He prohibited swearing oaths. When we carefully study the situation Jesus addressed, we find that He was condemning the easy way in which the Jews took oaths. The Jews, you see, were very clever. They knew that once an oath had been made, it had to be kept. So they claimed that there were two different kinds of oaths. There was an oath in which God's name was mentioned, and this kind of oath had to be kept. But there was also an oath in which God's name did not appear, an oath in which an appeal was made to heaven, or to the temple, or perhaps to your own head. The Jews made liberal use of the second kind of oath, but it was usually invoked to hide some sort of deception. It was this practice Jesus condemned.

For Jesus, every oath was an oath, and He clearly disapproved their frequent, indiscriminate use. In daily contact people should be able to trust one another without taking oaths. But that did not mean that Jesus prohibited oath-taking altogether. If, in serious circumstances, the government, as a servant of God, deems it necessary, an oath is not only permissible but should be taken. It is, after all, essential for the courts to discover whether the truth is being told or not. Thus the courts are empowered, whenever necessary, to summon people as though they were being called into the presence of God Himself. This is not vain, but respectful use of God's name.

For Adults Every promise made in the presence of God has the status of an oath. That is why it is not necessary to take oaths in church. This applies to the promises made by officebearers when they are installed; to parents who hold their children up for baptism; to bride and bridegroom when they marry; and to young people who make confession of their faith.

When someone confesses his or her faith and says "yes" to God, he or she may not use God's name in vain. The confession must be real, for it is given to God. The beauty of it is this—whoever confesses his faith and gives God his word, is given strength by God to keep that word. Otherwise, who would dare confess? But when we confess our faith and promise to persevere in that confession, God will help us through His grace. Thus, in effect, God gives us what He demands of us, for Jesus' sake. That is why we may, without fear, confess His name joyfully in church.

On the Textbook

1. Who was Uzzah? Why was the ark in his house?
2. Why did God kill seventy men?
3. What was so special about the ark anyway?
4. What was wrong with the way that the Israelites moved the ark from Kiriath-Jearim to Jerusalem?
5. Why should we be careful with God's Name?
6. What are some ways that we break the third commandment?
7. What is meant by "taking a text out of context"?
8. What happened to the children who made fun of Elisha (2 Kings 2:23-35)?
9. How can we withstand the words of scoffers?
10. What is blasphemy? How does a blasphemer use God's Name in vain?
11. What is an oath? (Check Q & A 102.)
12. What did Jesus say about oaths (Matthew 5:34-37)? What did He mean to say to the Jews, and to us?
13. According to Q & A 102, for what reasons may we swear an oath in God's Name?

On the Bible

1. Read Exodus 33:18-34:7. What did Moses want? What does verse 20 say about the glory of the Lord? Can you find some of the things that the Lord does to protect Moses, the people, and even the animals of Israel (e.g. 33:22, 34:3) from the danger of His glory? Read 33:19 and 34:6, 7 again. What is the similarity between these two verses? Why does the Lord in both verses describe Himself and use His Name at the same time? Look on page 55, in the section entitled "Vain Use" for some help. Look also at Exodus 3:14, 15.
2. Look up the following passages: Psalm 20:7, Psalm 34:1-3, Matthew 6:9, Matthew 18:20, Matthew 28:19, and Colossians 3:15-17 (esp. v. 17). How do these passages help to know how to obey the third commandment? List some of the ways we *should* use the Name of God.

For Discussion

1. What do you think of what the Lord did to Uzzah? Read Leviticus 24:10-23, too. Do these things seem harsh to you? Don't we commit sins like Uzzah's today? Why aren't we punished like that? Does that mean that we can be a little less careful about God's Name?
2. What does it mean that people know you as "Christians"? How might we be taking God's Name in vain, or causing others to blaspheme without ever saying a word?

Lord's Day XXXVIII

Illustration: **Mark 2:23-28**

The fourth commandment is the last one of the first table of the law. It therefore partly forms a transition to the second. The difference between these two tables was that the first dealt with love for God, whereas the second dealt with love for one's neighbor. In the fourth commandment we see that our love for God can be expressed by our observing the Sunday to His glory. The same commandment, though, also begins to speak of love for our neighbors. If we all keep Sunday as a day of rest, it will surely be a day of peace and joy for all people.

During Jesus' ministry on earth, the Jews had forgotten that the Sabbath was supposed to be a day of joy. They had put so many restrictions on it that it had become a difficult day for people to keep. This is why Jesus said: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27 NIV).

Jesus said this on a Sabbath. His disciples had not been with Him long yet and they were walking through some grain fields. Jesus and His disciples were very poor. They were not on salary, earned no money, and lived a day-by-day existence. This particular Sabbath, the disciples were hungry, but they were familiar with Levitical law which said: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien" (Lev. 23:22 NIV). They knew that the poor were allowed to pick whatever remained after the harvest. Walking with Jesus through the grain fields, they took advantage of the law, picking some of the heads of grain and eating them.

The Pharisees, however, who had been spying on Jesus even on this Sabbath, thought they could confront Him with a violation of the Sabbath command. Had not God forbidden all work on the Sabbath? The words were sweet on their tongues as they reminded Jesus that anyone who worked on the Sabbath should surely be put to death.

It was true, the law did not allow work on the Sabbath, but the question was: what was work? The Pharisees thought they knew. They had invented no

less than thirty-nine specific things that people were not allowed to do on the Sabbath, and rubbing the ears of grain in your hands to remove chaff was one of them.

That is why they were so quick to challenge Jesus: "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath" (Mark 2:24 NIV). They thought it necessary to defend God's law against this lawbreaker Jesus. But Jesus replied beautifully. He told them that the law of God was not a book to be used indiscriminately, stating you may do this and you may not do that. No, in all circumstances of life the law demands a *personal* decision. You continually have to pray for guidance in this. Jesus then gave them an example.

He reminded them that David had entered the tabernacle once and had eaten the consecrated bread; bread which presumably was only meant for the priests. David and his companions were in great need at this time because they were being pursued by Saul and had nowhere else to go. God did not hold this against David.

The same truth applied to the Sabbath commandment. On the Sabbath no work must be done. But if you write down in a book exactly what you may and may not do, you become enslaved to that book, and you are no longer a cheerful child of God. That is why Jesus said: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27 NIV). He did not mean that it was not the Lord's day, but rather that it was meant to be used in joyful service to God. If you sit in a corner, worrying about what work you might possibly do, you become a slave to fear. If you take great pleasure in the Sabbath day, given for our rest and enjoyment, you serve the Lord with gladness.

Where Did the Sabbath Come From?

To find out what the Sabbath means, we must return to the beginning. When God created the world and men, He also instituted the Sabbath. It was a day of joy for Himself. Even though the eternal God is not limited

to our time, He nevertheless created and knows our days and lives with us in them.

God took great pleasure in creating the beauty of this world and all the plants and animals and people in it. He was pleased by the greatness and splendor of His creation and wanted us to enjoy and see it as He did. So He set aside a day in which we would enjoy His creation and rest from our own work. Most especially, He wanted us to glorify Him, our Creator, who had given us everything. He wanted us to say to Him: "Thank you, Lord. We are so happy that You are our God."

Such was the beginning of the Sabbath.

How Did the Sabbath Remain in Place

After man's fall into sin, man no longer had the right to this special day. Yet God again gave the Sabbath to Israel, this time as a day of deliverance. On the

Sabbath, they were to remember that the Lord had redeemed them from Egypt, had saved them from their misery. "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day" (Deut. 5:15 NIV).

Another day of rest, not *deserved* but *given through grace*, after a week of sin, is Sunday.

How Did Israel Celebrate the Sabbath?

Israel's Sabbath began at sundown Friday evening and lasted until late Saturday afternoon. All work stopped, and Israel-

ites were not even permitted to buy food. There was to be a sacred assembly, according to Leviticus 23:3, which during Jesus' time took place in the synagogues and which Jesus also usually attended (Luke 4:16).

In the Israelite homes a Sabbath meal was held, and people put on their best clothes and ate a sumptuous meal. They talked about God who rested after His labors and about Israel released from slavery in Egypt.

Jesus and the Sabbath

In Jesus' time the Pharisees had spoiled much of the Sabbath's beauty through their

endless rules and regulations. For example, they were not allowed to travel more than 7500 feet (a Sabbath day's journey); no one could wear a hat

with a brim wider than three centimeters, because this would mean carrying a burden; you could not wear shoes with nails, for that meant lifting something heavy; and there were many other trivial regulations.

Jesus tried to liberate the people from the extremes of this legalism. He cured illnesses on the Sabbath, despite the Pharisees' serious objections. He wanted to restore the Sabbath as a day of joy for both God and man. He did not want it as a day of rules and regulations.

He once enjoyed absolute rest on the Sabbath. That was on the day of His burial. His body rested in the dust of the earth for the sake of our sins. He then fulfilled the shadowy symbols of Sabbath law of which Colossians 2:16-17 says: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." Here Paul means that we are richer than the Jews. Jewish passover was fulfilled on Good Friday, and is now replaced by the Lord's Supper; Jewish circumcision was replaced by Christian baptism; so too, the Jewish Sabbath, fulfilled on a Saturday, the day in which Christ lay in the grave, has been replaced by the Christian Sunday.

Sunday

We celebrate our day of rest on Sunday. The early Christians already recognized Sunday as the day of the Lord (Rev. 1:10). It was the day when Paul met with the church (Acts 20:7) and the church collected funds for the poor (I Cor. 16:1ff).

Why did they decide on Sunday, when the Lord emphatically designated the seventh day? It was because they were convinced that all days were sanctified by Christ, but that one day was to be set aside especially for the service of God. They decided that of all days, the day of resurrection was most suitable to be the Lord's Day, for it was on that day that Christ achieved total victory over sin and death.

How Should We Celebrate Sunday?

On Sunday we may rest from our work. We should not spoil this blessing by creating work for ourselves or for others.

There are young people who do homework on Sunday, or study for an exam. This kills the joy that God has given this day of rest. Other people go to

football games. Big games bring in thousands of spectators. Extra policemen and security personnel have to be on duty, compelled to work for the sake of sports. The joy of the day of rest is again sacrificed.

The atmosphere on Sunday should be peaceful, reflecting the inner peace of those keeping it. The worship of God, particularly with the church, should be the focal point.

The entire church, the body of Christ, is made up of both old and young. Together they hear God's Word. Together they pray for the universal church spread throughout the world. Together they give their offerings for those in need. And the Lord will be with them, whether in an ordinary service or through the signs of His redemption reflected in baptism or the Lord's Supper.

What Does Lord's Day 38 Mean by "The Schools"? According to Lord's Day 38, the fourth commandment requires "that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained." By schools it first of all refers to seminaries where ministers are trained. These servants of the Word should know the Bible in the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) and must study everything necessary for the accurate interpretation and application of God's Word. The people in church should hear sound preaching and for this, schools and seminaries are needed. But even more basic than this thorough study is the need for prayer. Without prayer, nothing can survive.

Are We Not Allowed to Work at All on Sunday? Of course we are allowed to work on Sunday, because without work the world could not survive. But we should never become like the Pharisees, defining precisely what work is.

Fisherman would sometimes ask their minister: "Are we allowed to sail out Sunday evenings after the church service is over, if the wind is favorable? Otherwise, we may have to wait two or three days . . ." The minister would reply: "That is between God and you." The result was that some would set sail while others would not.

We can at least say this: people should do all the work that is necessary. A farmer knows he cannot plow or harvest on Sunday; but there is no way he can avoid caring for his livestock.

Many other people, such as policemen and

prison guards, have no choice but to work on Sunday. There are hospital employees, such as doctors and nurses and other staff members. They have to provide medical care on Sunday as well as on other days. Finally, (and certainly these examples are not exhaustive) there is the church service. Ministers and caretakers can hardly decide to stay home on Sunday.

One thing is certain however: the Lord's Day exists for the glory of God and for the joy of His people.

The Other Days We should not be misled into thinking that other days are more "permissive" than Sunday, for every day belongs to God and to Christ who said: "Surely I will be with you always" (Matt. 28:20b NIV).

Every morning our morning prayer should rise: "Lord, please let me serve You in all my work." If we truly ask for the Spirit's help, we are on our way to heaven, where it is always Sunday.

For Adults There has been much dispute about proper Sabbath observance.

The English Puritans applied a certain legalism to its observance by emphasizing that you should do as little as possible. They were against going for walks on Sunday or cooking.

The Synod of Dort made the important distinction between the *ceremonial* and *moral* aspects of the fourth commandment. Selection of the seventh day of the week (Saturday) as well as the strict observance practiced by the Jewish religion were considered to be ceremonial. The moral aspect included the two following provisions: a day of rest for necessary religious meditation, and rest from compulsive labor and unnecessary exertion, both of which prevent worship. All works of charity, however, together with all necessary tasks were allowed. Synod saw the importance of Sunday for family life, with parents and children alike relaxing and enjoying one another's company. They saw it as a time when people could discuss God's kingdom with each other; a time that you could later look back on with appreciation and gratitude.

Adventists, who observe the Jewish Sabbath and are otherwise known as Seventh Day Adventists, originated in the United States. The movement's spiritual father, William Miller, had calculated that Christ would return on October 21, 1844. When this did not happen, they concluded that the reason

Christ had not returned yet was because the church had desecrated the Sabbath. Since that time Adventists have preached that the establishment of Sunday as the Lord's Day was a great error and should be changed back to Saturday. People are well advised to be on guard against their teachings.

On the Textbook

1. How does the fourth commandment form a transition between the first and second tables of the law?
2. How did the Pharisees think about work and rest on the Sabbath? List some things they did which show how they thought.
3. How did Jesus want them to look at the law? What kind of obedience does Jesus demand?
4. What example did Jesus use in this connection?
5. What is the origin of the Sabbath?
6. How did the Sabbath change after the fall? What kind of day did it become?
7. What can you learn about the Sabbath from Colossians 2:16-17?
8. Why have we changed the day of rest from Saturday to Sunday?
9. How would you describe the proper way to celebrate Sunday?
10. Q & A 103 speaks about "education" (schools?). Explain why it does.
11. What is the relationship between Sunday and the rest of the days of the week? Look at Q & A 103, under "Second, . . ."

On the Bible

1. Read Hebrews 4:1-11. What is the author concerned about in this section (chapter 3:7-4:11)? What was the rest promised to Israel? What does the author mean in 4:1? Into what rest is entry still promised? (Check verse 9.) What does the author mean in verse 10, where he says, "Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work"? What is the connection between the rest of the Sabbath, the rest of entering into Canaan, the rest we have on Sundays, and the rest spoken of in Q & A 103 as the "eternal Sabbath"?

2. Read Matthew 12:1-14. What is happening in this passage? What did the Pharisees think of what Jesus and His disciples were doing? How did Jesus respond to them? Explain what Jesus was trying to say to the Pharisees. What did Jesus do besides picking grain on the Sabbath? How did He defend that? Explain why it was especially beautiful that this man was healed on the Sabbath. Does Jesus mean for us to throw away every "rule" for celebrating Sundays? Does He mean to say, "It doesn't matter what you do on that day"?

For Discussion

1. "Sunday is the New Testament Sabbath, a day of deliverance. We are free from Old Testament style rules. So I can do what I please—go to church, work, shop—that's what freedom is all about." What do you think?
2. "Sunday is simply the New Testament Sabbath day. So we must behave as the Israelites did. No cooking, no cleaning, no bicycle riding, no fun. It is a day of rest. And rest means doing nothing." What do you think?
3. "If nurses and doctors and policemen are allowed to work on Sundays, why not a factory worker, or greenhouse worker? It will cost a lot of money to close down the factory, or to let the flowers go for one day. That would be a waste. God doesn't like waste. Besides, if I can't work Sundays, I might lose my job." Discuss.
4. It is forbidden in some (e.g. Islamic) countries to celebrate Sunday as a Christian day. Would Monday, or Wednesday or any other day be just as good?

Lord's Day XXXIX

Illustration: The fifth commandment "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you," (Ex. 20:12 NIV) seems like an easy commandment to keep. Why shouldn't we honor our fathers and mothers? Who is closer to us? Whom do we defend as passionately as our parents? Whoever touches them, touches us. Honoring them should present no problem.

However, let's not jump to conclusions. It isn't as simple as it seems. One of the oldest stories in the Bible is that of the sons of Noah. It happened a long time ago, but is still applicable today.

Was Noah an abusive father? A drunkard, regularly drinking himself into a stupor? On the contrary, Noah was probably one of the best parents who ever lived. He loved God more than anything and this love overflowed to his children. His faith was so strong that it enabled him to stand against the whole world, steadfastly maintaining that God was right and everyone else was wrong. Because of his faith in what God had told him, he built the ark all by himself. When God's great judgment, the flood, came, only Noah and his family were saved. Everyone else perished.

Was not Noah a father deserving respect? Would not any child be proud of such a father?

Was drinking a virtue though? Or could there be pride in what he did while he was drunk?

It was amazing that a man like Noah, god-fearing and full of faith, could sink so low. The thing to remember is, of course, the fact that Noah, despite his piety, was still human and therefore prone to sin. Parents today are no less sinful than Noah, and are as capable of moral failures.

You know the story. While Noah was drunk, one of his sons did *not* honor him. Ham ridiculed his father's shame and tried to get his brothers to do the same. The "old man" always so religious, had really made a fool of himself this time! Wasn't it hilarious? But Shem and Japheth refused to join in. They were appalled that their father was in such a state, but they continued to honor him. They took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's

nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness" (Gen. 9:23 NIV). It never occurred to them to mock their father.

Shortly afterwards we read that God cursed Ham for his dishonorable behavior but blessed his brothers. Ham's descendants would bear the guilt of his wicked attitude toward his father. The evil that was found in Ham would be even more evident in his children, particularly Canaan, and later descendants, and things would not go well with them. But the Lord blessed Shem and Japheth. Their descendants would benefit from the respect both these sons had shown toward their father.

The same blessing was later given to Israel in the law of Moses: "That you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

Who Are Your Father and Mother?

With great confidence a small child will readily say that his father and mother are the best parents in the whole world. There is a touching naiveté in this early faith, but it will not last. As they grow, children realize more and more that their parents are ordinary people with faults. Yet even then, parents remain in a different category. After all, they provide care, which includes a home, food and drink, clothes and schooling, and, as long as necessary, children are completely dependent on them.

Besides these material things, though, there is something else: parents love their children. It is a wonderful thing that children are more important than anything else to their parents. There are also abusive parents who do not love their children and neglect them. Most Western countries have laws that enable the state to assume responsibility for children if the parents are criminally negligent. Sometimes this becomes necessary and it is good to know that such laws exist.

Ordinarily though, parents love their children dearly; sometimes too much; sometimes not in the right way. Think of Jacob who favored Joseph over

his brothers who began to hate him.

Why do our parents love us? Because we are part of them; we are their flesh and blood. Many parents are proud when their children look like them. The remark "a chip off the old block" will make a father grin from ear to ear, and a simple "just like her Mom," will make a mother blush with pleasure.

Why Should We Honor Our Parents?

Should we honor our parents because they care for us; or because we are their flesh and blood? This is the basis of what the Bible calls "natural love." Of natural love Jesus said: "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?" (Matt. 5:46 NIV).

The day might come when our parents no longer care for us and we no longer love them. May we then stop honoring them?

Through the Bible the catechism teaches us another reason. It says, "It pleases God to govern us by their hand." God Himself decreed who would be our particular parents. Our parents are both a *gift* and a *decree* of God. In order to truly appreciate this rich gift, think of how difficult it must be for a child to have no parents.

As far as God's decree is concerned, you sometimes hear young people thoughtlessly complaining: "It's not my fault that I was born." It's true that they had nothing to do with it, but God decreed it and, according to His will, their parents direct their lives.

How Should We Honor Our Parents?

Time changes. Children used to address their parents much more respectfully than now and manners were counted as very important. The Dr. Spock (and others like him) era has come, and children today are often treated as friends and equals by their parents.

Of course, a relationship of mutual trust between parents and children is a good thing. However, parents should still be able to tell their children what to do and expect them to obey. It is not always possible for parents to explain fully to their children why some things are allowed while others are not. For example, a toddler must be taught to stay clear of a woodstove. If the child persistently tries to touch it, he should have his knuckles rapped. As children grow up, parents will explain wherever possible, why they make their

children do certain things.

Obedience, however, is not the only thing. Obedience can be given in a sullen, resentful manner. The Lord asks children to open their hearts to their parents. He asks children to love and pray for the parents as the parents pray for them. He asks them to do things, in and around the house, without being asked.

How Long Should We Continue to Honor Our Parents?

We must honor our parents as long as they live. Even when they grow old, possibly developing certain problems, they deserve our respect.

Over time, the scope of parental authority changes. There is also a difference in the way in which children obey their parents. For example, it is sometimes necessary to spank a child if he repeatedly gets into trouble. But as children get older, corporal punishment is no longer advisable. In the teenage years, it could lead to serious misunderstandings. Ultimately children become independent. They begin to earn their own living, and take on their own responsibility. They become subject to different forms of authority and parents no longer exercise their authority in the same way.

When children become completely independent, having confessed their faith publicly, holding down their own jobs, they may, of course, still consult their parents, but the time of complete obedience has come to an end.

The command though, to honor your father and your mother, never loses its validity. It is a sad thing to see children, who are financially successful, ashamed of ordinary parents.

Is Parental Authority the Only Authority?

There is other authority in the world besides parental authority. In fact, parents give some of their authority to other people. They entrust their children to a school with the understanding that teachers will apply authority to their children in the same way they would.

The Bible also speaks of authority in *society*: employers have authority over employees, given to them by God. Such authority requires obedience, but, as in the case of growing children, it also requires mutual consultation.

The *state* also has forms of authority. The state governs, not only in name of the people or for the

sake of justice, but principally on behalf of God. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Rom. 13:1 NIV).

There is also authority in the *church*. Here Jesus Christ reigns as King, but He uses elders to assist Him in the work of governing, much as a ruler uses his ministers of state. "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account" (Heb. 13:17 NIV).

Finally, there is the authority of a husband over his wife. Even though the father and the mother are one with respect to their authority over the children, and even though they may regulate family affairs by mutual agreement, the Bible nevertheless designates the husband as head of the wife and specifies that she is to be subject to her husband (Eph. 5:22). This authority differs from the authority parents have over children. The authority of the husband over the wife simply means that the Lord wants to preserve things as He has created them. He first created Adam and then Eve as "a help suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18 NIV). If a woman marries, she should be prepared to submit to the rule God has established.

To What Lengths Authority?

Must children do everything parents ask? The story is told of a young Jew, Capadose, who lived in the nineteenth century. He wanted to become a Christian but his parents forbade it. When he persisted, his father cursed the young man. In deep despair he left the city, wondering what to do. But God came and comforted him. As he walked out into the fields, he saw a rainbow set in the clouds and was reminded of the fact that God saw him and would take care of him.

Remember this! We must always try to be obedient to our parents—but there are limits. If they order us to do something that conflicts with God's Word, we should refuse. Acts 5:29 reads: "We must obey God rather than men!" (NIV).

This is why a Christian may find himself supporting a strike, not something he would readily do. He should never strike simply to impose his will on an employer or to gain unnecessary advantages. Quite possibly, though, the employer might be violating God's law in his business dealings to the point where a Christian worker might be compelled to stop work.

Similarly, a Christian may be required to withhold his obedience to the government. But it must always be abundantly clear that the objective

is obedience to God. At any other time we are obliged to live in obedience, even if that means great material loss.

For Adults

This commandment is accompanied by a *promise*: "So that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." This promise does not mean that those who are most obedient will live the longest. It does mean, however, that God will bless the lives of those who have respect for authority instituted by Him. When there are good family relationships, it will be felt in society as a whole.

The home can be compared to a microscopic state or society. A person who can obey at home will also be able to do so in other areas of life. Whoever can maintain order at home will be able to respect order in society and in government. If family life is healthy, the life of a nation is healthy. In contrast, disobedience at home can lead to decay in society.

With respect to disobeying the government, John Calvin exercised extreme caution. He said it was easy for people to misuse authority and emphasized the fact that, wherever possible, courts should be used to defend the right of people against any possible abuse of authority by a tyrant.

On the Textbook

1. How did Ham fail to honor his father Noah?
2. What was the result of Ham's sin? What was the result of what Shem and Japheth did?
3. What are some of the things that make our parents special, or "different"?
4. Does honoring our parents mean that they are never wrong, or never make mistakes?
5. Why should we honor our parents, according to Q & A 104?
6. Whose "fault," is it that you were born, or that you have been taken up into your particular family?
7. Explain why "Obedience . . . is not the only thing."
8. Why should we honor our parents as long as they live?
9. Explain how the call to honor parents remains the same as long as they live, and yet changes in meaning as you grow older.

10. List and describe briefly five expressions or forms of authority found in our society besides parental authority.
11. Is it possible that a Christian would ever have to disobey one of these authorities? When? Is there anything in Scripture to give us some wisdom for such times?

On the Bible

1. Read Romans 13:1-7. Who established “the authorities that exist”? Are there *any* authorities that don’t have their establishment from God? What do you know about the kind of government Paul and the early church lived under? Check your history books to find out who the emperor of Rome was at this time, around 57 A.D. Compare what Paul is saying to what Jesus said in Matthew 20:21. What are Jesus and Paul teaching us about our debt of obedience and respect to the government? Does it make any difference if we live under an unjust government? Why do we have to obey the government—because it is faithful to God, or because God has established its authority?
2. Read Colossians 3:18-4:1. What is the relationship between verses 18 and 19? 20 and 21? 22 and 4:1? What do Paul’s words say to those under authority? To those in authority? What are his final words in this passage? Do they hold for all who are in authority—husbands, fathers, masters, teachers, governors, etc.? What are his words to slaves, especially in verses 24 and 25? Do they still apply to all those under authority, as for example employees?

For Discussion

1. Your parents and your teacher believe that you have done something wrong at school. You tell them that you didn’t do it, and you are being honest. But you get punished anyway. What do you do? What do you feel like doing?
2. Read about what happened to the disciples in Acts 5:29-42. They were forbidden to speak in the name of Jesus, but they disobeyed, and did it anyway. Yet, read verse 40. They were beaten for their disobedience. How does this passage help us to understand what it means to obey God rather than men? Did the disciples question the authority of those who punished them? Did they honor those people, even though they disobeyed them? Were they obedient to what Paul says in Romans 13? Describe a situation, real or fictional, that is similar to what happened to the disciples. Is it legitimate to say that you can disobey someone in authority, and yet honor them?

Lord's Day XL

Illustration: Immediately following the commandment to honor your father and your mother, is the commandment, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13 NIV).

Simple obedience changes into uncontrollable rage before your eyes. Fists clench, eyes flame, a knife is drawn and blood flows—human blood. The dreadful thing is that things like that really happen! Teenagers can have such deep-rooted feelings against someone else that they wish a person dead! They probably don't even think seriously about their feelings—but it happens. It also happens that adults, despite their age or common sense, can fly at each other's throats. There are murderers and there are those who are murdered, even though a country is not at war.

This is the world we live in, and it has been this way since the beginning of sin. That original sin seemed innocent enough. What difference could it possibly make whether someone ate an apple or some other kind of fruit.

Yet this sin was fatal, for it represented rebellion against God. Because people no longer respected God, they no longer respected each other. Adam and Eve first realized the full impact of sin when they went out into the field and found the body of their beloved son Abel, slain by his own brother.

Why did this death happen? When were the first murderous thoughts born in Cain's mind? The murder was not the result of a sudden outburst of anger. The roots went much deeper, into the secret chambers of Cain's heart. The truth was that Cain despised his brother. He couldn't stand him. Cain himself may have been at a loss to explain why he felt that way.

He could see, and was not pleased by the fact, that God loved Abel. It irked Cain's sense of fairness. If Abel had been the only one making sacrifices to God, he could have understood this. But they both made sacrifices. Cain, who worked the soil, sacrificed part of his crops to God, while Abel, who kept flocks, sacrificed a sheep to God. What more could Cain do? He knew that the Lord looked with favor on Abel, but kept him at a

distance. This was more than Cain could bear, and it became a source of deep resentment.

One day God talked to Cain about this resentment. That was good of the Lord. He still does that today. He is always there to show us the way. He said to Cain: "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:6 and 7 NIV).

Cain should have realized at this point that God was not unjust. Happiness was his for the taking if he would only do what was right. The problem, though, was within himself. Admittedly, he had made sacrifices, but his heart had not been in it. You see, he didn't really care about God but wanted to be his own master. Perhaps he was still offended by the fact that God had evicted his father and mother from Paradise. He didn't agree with God, and resented his God-fearing brother tremendously.

Because he did not allow himself to be corrected, Cain's anger festered within him, to the point where he wished Abel were dead. One day, he could no longer control this evil desire. With apparent calm he asked his brother to go out to the field with him, and "while they were in the field Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him" (Gen. 4:8b NIV).

Cain's problems were now over. Were they really though? Wherever he went this murder would accompany him—Abel's blood would never cease to cry to him from the ground. God's voice would hound him; the voice of his conscience would trail him forever.

A murderer will never know complete peace of mind unless he surrenders himself completely to our Lord Jesus Christ who has also opened Paradise for those who break the sixth commandment.

Have People Improved?

One is tempted to think that Cain was an exception to the rule, and that people who are a little more civilized no longer commit such heinous crimes.

But that is a wrong conclusion. Moses, chosen by God to present the law to the people of Israel, knew better. He was one of the humblest people who ever lived. He must have had an enormous amount of patience with the Israelites, who seemed born to complain. But Moses committed a murder once too. In a fit of rage he killed an Egyptian. The tendency to say, "Oh, but that Egyptian had it coming. He was abusing a slave," is wrong. After all, the Egyptian only did as he had been taught, and Moses, under his own authority, killed him.

The New Testament introduces us to one of the most educated people of his time: Saul, who had studied at the feet of Gamaliel. Yet the Bible says that he breathed out "murderous threats." Like a hungry lion, Paul paced back and forth among people who had done nothing more than love the Lord Jesus.

Remember too, what people had done to the Lord Jesus Himself. A whole nation, in bitter hatred, had chanted: "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"

Anyone can lose their self-control and wish someone else dead. Newspaper headlines outlining murder are common. The urge to kill is not found only in the uneducated. It lodges in all hearts. At some point you may have wished someone dead. That was the root of Cain's sin.

Why Is Murder So Dreadful?

There's a great difference between a man and an animal. People have been created in God's image, while animals have not. That is why we may kill animals. God Himself "made garments of skin" for Adam and Eve; and Jesus accompanied fishermen, sharing their meals.

Human beings are created in God's image. This makes murder an assault on God's image and an affront to Him. It is insulting to your parents if you deface their portrait, but if you destroy the image of God, you insult Him. Even the most corrupt being still reveals something of the image of God because he remains human. A person may never be murdered, tossed into eternity at random. If a person is so sinful that he corrupts the image of God in his life, he should be brought to a knowledge of Christ. Christ can make him into a new creation, "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24 NIV).

Where Does Murder Begin?

Murder begins in man's heart. "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery . . ." (Mark 7:21 NIV). "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer . . ." (I John 3:15 NIV).

The catechism speaks of the "root of murder." A root is that part of the plant which is underground. You can weed as much as you like, but if you don't pull out the roots, the weeds will just grow back again.

The roots of murder are envy, hatred, wrath and revenge. Envy is the inability to accept that some people have more than you do. Hatred is a profound dislike for another person. Wrath is becoming so angry that you no longer know what you do or say. Revenge is the determination to get even with someone—to repay a wrong.

How to Triumph

Some people believe that a good upbringing teaches you to control yourself, and by doing so you will learn to understand other people.

However, this is not enough. Even the most well-brought up, intelligent people can torment each other. No, it is the *heart* that must be changed. And only God can do that through His Holy Spirit—only God can give you a heart filled with love; the same love with which God loves you despite all your shortcomings and guilt.

God will give you this only if you ask Him. "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13 NIV). If you ask God, He will give you what the Bible calls "fruits of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22).

The catechism identifies the fruits of the Spirit as patience, which prevents you from acting hastily; peace, which aims at reconciliation; gentleness, which teaches sacrifice; charity, or compassion for people in need; friendliness, which enables you to treat fellow human beings as friends.

Is Killing Always Wrong?

"If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed . . ." (Ex. 22:2 NIV).

It's midnight, and you wake up to noises that indicate that someone has broken into your house. Upon investigating, you are attacked and in the ensuing fight the thief is fatally wounded. No one can say that you are guilty of murder—you were defending your life and your property.

We are permitted to defend our property and we certainly have the right to defend our lives. Whoever kills in self-defense is not a murderer.

A government should also protect the lives and property of its subjects. It does this through a police force and militia. It stands to reason, therefore, that policemen and soldiers must be armed. Romans 13:4b says: "He does not bear the sword for nothing" (NIV). People must be protected against crime and against the possible invasion of an enemy.

Is Every War Just? Not every war can be considered just. The Bible gives examples of both just and unjust wars.

Israel was commanded by God to wage war against the Canaanites "for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Gen. 15:16 NIV). But when Saul tried to exterminate the Gibeonites, whose lives Israel had solemnly sworn to spare, he became guilty of murder (II Sam. 21:1).

In the New Testament soldiers came to John the Baptist for advice. He did not tell them to leave their jobs, condemning that way of life. But he did say to them: "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay" (Luke 3:14 NIV).

Through the centuries war has been one of the greatest disasters that a nation could live through. It is not only in present day warfare that entire cities are destroyed and populations decimated. That also happened during the conquest of Canaan; during the destruction of Jerusalem; and during the so-called religious wars. However, the scale and speed of destruction has grown enormously, making war all the more nightmarish.

War can only be justified if it is undertaken for reasons of the greatest good. Life itself is not necessarily that reason. Of highest value is the honor of God and His church. If an enemy attacks God or His church, bent on total destruction, the government, as God's servant, must fight to turn this tide.

It is also possible for the government itself to abuse its military power. If people are convinced that a government's military actions are contrary to God's will, they may not obey the government. According to Acts 5:29, they must obey God rather than man.

Capital Punishment Many countries have discontinued capital punishment for humanitarian reasons. They feel that circumstantial evidence could prove to be wrong and also that attempts should be made at rehabilitation. On the other hand, evidence often leaves no doubt as to a person's guilt and a person is usually more repentant in the face of death than if given a new lease on life.

God instituted the death penalty for murderers, not only for the people of Israel (Ex. 21:12), but for all people. After the flood God gave Noah commandments for all mankind. Among them was the following commandment: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." Through this commandment God protects human life. He who contemplates killing anyone would think twice before committing murder, if he knew that by doing so he would forfeit his own life.

For Adults In desperation people sometimes take their own lives. **Suicide** This action is often judged unmercifully, the view being taken that someone who commits suicide is lost forever.

Whenever such a terrible thing happens, however, we must be extremely careful. We may never judge, for the last judgment belongs to God, the only Judge "who is able to save and destroy" (James 4:12 NIV).

There are those who are easily depressed. At times they don't know what to do and cannot be held responsible for their actions. Who are we to judge such people who end their lives in a moment of dark despair? We can do no more than commit them to the wisdom of God.

Discipline Life, given by God, is a great gift. We may not gamble with it. A person can ruin his life through alcoholism or immorality. He can destroy his life by taxing his energy beyond its capacity as, for example, in sport, or by risking his life unnecessarily. All these things are in conflict with the sixth commandment.

The sixth commandment requires discipline, that is, sound use of our physical energy. Exercise, and moderation in all things, will help build a healthy and constructive way of life.

On the Textbook

1. What happened once man had lost respect for God?
2. What was the root of Cain's sin?
3. What did God say to Cain about his envy and resentment?
4. Were Cain's problems solved by Abel's murder? What is the only real solution to such problems?
5. Won't education and civilization prevent people from committing murder? Why not?
6. What makes murder such a serious sin?
7. What are the roots of murder? What does Q & A 106 say about them?
8. How can sinful people be persuaded not to commit murder in thought, word, or deed?
9. Is all killing murder?
10. What is a "just war"? What happens when Christians are asked to fight in an unjust war, or to use force to promote injustice?
11. Was capital punishment ordained by God only for Israel? Support your answer with Scripture.

On the Bible

1. Read 2 Samuel 11:1-12:14. What was the start of David's trouble? What did he end up doing to Uriah when his other schemes didn't work? How did Nathan show David his sin? How did David respond (12:13)? What was Nathan's response (12:14)? Now read Psalm 51. What kinds of things does David pray for? What does he promise? What sacrifice will God accept? What are "broken spirits" and "broken and contrite hearts"? What does this tell you about forgiveness for murderers?
2. We may not kill in thought, word, or deed. But what ought we to do in obedience to the sixth commandment? Read Leviticus 19:17, 18; Proverbs 3:29; Luke 10:25-37; Romans 12:9-21; Galatians 6:7-10; 1 Peter 4:7-11. Check the list of texts under Q & A 107, and add three of these to the list given here.

For Discussion

1. "Abortion and capital punishment are basically the same thing—murder. You can't be anti-abortion if you are in favor of capital punishment." Respond to this person, using the Bible to support what you say.
2. What is "euthanasia"? Check with a dictionary or your parents. Does the sixth commandment allow for euthanasia? What if the person asks to have his life ended? What if death will mean the end of a meaningless life, or great suffering and pain?

Lord's Day XLI

Illustration: The seventh commandment is the commandment concerning marriage. In it, God commands husbands and wives, partners in a very special way, to love and remain faithful to each other.

You might think, therefore, that this commandment is irrelevant to unmarried people. This is not entirely true. Think of Joseph in Egypt. Though unmarried, he was greatly tempted to commit adultery. Quite probably most young people in a similar situation would have succumbed.

Joseph was far away from his father. His mother had been dead for years. His brothers had treated him cruelly. No one would point a finger at him if he committed adultery—for there was no one nearby who knew him. Besides, was it so terribly wrong? After all, Joseph was a slave in the house of a man who had bought him on the slave market. His diligence and talents had made him indispensable in the household and his master had entrusted him with all his possessions. Was it Joseph's fault that his owner's beautiful wife continually followed him with her eyes? He hadn't asked for her attention and couldn't help it if she liked him. Nor could he help it when she said: "Joseph, come to bed with me" (Gen. 39:7b NIV).

If Joseph had consented, his life as a slave in that household would have been made a lot easier. The fact that he did not made him extremely vulnerable to her anger. Most young men would have given in, probably considering it an opportunity.

Joseph, however, remained faithful—faithful to his master who trusted him implicitly and whom he did not want to deceive—and, more importantly, faithful to God. His conscience would trouble him, preventing prayer. This is why he answered Potiphar's wife in this way: "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9 NIV).

The wife then turned on Joseph with a vengeance, accusing him of the adulterous intentions she herself had had. Her husband, understandably, became very angry. Joseph was thrown into prison for life. He, however, preferred prison

to the bed of another man's wife. He refused to commit adultery because God had forbidden it.

Why Is Adultery Such a Grave Offense?

Things done on the sly are never honest. Adultery is always clandestine. People never admit to it openly, instead continually covering up their lives with lies. Imagine furtively going into someone else's garden and deliberately destroying young plants which the owner has nurtured with great care. It is even more underhanded to secretly destroy a marriage, for it is one of the most beautiful things God has given to man.

What Is Marriage?

Marriage is the most profound and richest form of communion God has given to two people. A good set of parents will prove to be the best example of that and it is agonizingly sad when children grow up with parents who do not give this example. Quarrels may be so violent that one will threaten to walk out. The only thing to do in such a situation is pray that God will restore the harmony between them.

A child deeply feels a bonding with both of his parents. He knows they belong together and form a unity. This is the way God created it in Paradise. At first Adam was alone and although he had everything he needed, he sensed an emptiness. He saw that all the animals whom he had named were in pairs, but that he himself was alone. The Lord then said: "It is not good for the man to be alone, I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18 NIV). And while Adam slept, God gave him a mate in a very strange way. He took one of Adam's ribs and made a woman out of it.

The account of Eve's creation has been subject to much ridicule. "Do you really believe that? How could God possibly make a woman out of a single rib? Wasn't Adam crippled after that?" Such jeer-

ing reflects a lack of faith. God made Adam out of the dust of the earth to demonstrate man's close relationship to the rest of creation. Eve was created out of Adam to demonstrate the intimate relationship between man and woman. Precisely how this was done we do not know, nor is it necessary for us to know. But on the basis of this remarkable creation of woman, we can be certain that God has given to marriage the most intimate dimension imaginable.

What Is the Purpose of Marriage?

God's purpose for marriage can be seen in Genesis 2:18. "It is not good for the man to be alone, I will make a helper suitable for him" (NIV).

This passage contains two thoughts. First of all, that loneliness is taken away through marriage. God created man as a social being. He was made to share his thoughts and emotions with someone else. A man can only do this totally with his wife and a wife can only do this totally with her husband.

Secondly, the creation of woman provided a helper for man; a helper who would be suitable for him. The purpose of the woman, therefore, is to help her husband. This is no humiliation but an honor.

Since woman was to complement man, the Lord gave her different attributes or characteristics such as sensitivity, intuition, intimacy, and the readiness to sacrifice. To help her in this task she was endowed with so many of these special characteristics that they came to be recognized as definitive female characteristics. In contrast, man was identified more by the characteristics of power, intellect and authority.

Needless to say, there are exceptions to both: males who are exceptionally sensitive and females who are unusually forceful. But it is undeniably true that God has made physical and spiritual differences between man and woman. Rather than challenging these differences, we should accept them for what they are.

Women should not aspire to do everything men have traditionally done. It will not make them happier. In some countries, women work right beside men in the factories while the children are packed off to government run daycare centers. This is disastrous for family life.

There are certain professions into which women fit well. Nursing, teaching, day care, diaconal assistants, and other such tasks, are generally done much better by women than men.

Monogamy

The Lord gave Adam only one wife. If it had been necessary, He could easily have given him more. But one mate was ideal, and the Bible says: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24 NIV).

Two, who become one flesh, is the way God intended it to be. Throughout history, this law has often been broken. Monogamy (one wife) has often been replaced by polygamy (many wives). Some believers in the Bible also sinned against this rule. Jacob had four wives, and both David and Solomon had even more. The Bible clearly indicates, however, that this was wrong, and we read that these marriages were plagued by a great deal of strife and misery. Jacob favored Joseph, the son of his favorite wife, and consequently, the other sons sold him into slavery. In David's family, one son murdered another son, both children of different mothers. And in David's old age, that same son attempted to usurp the throne, losing his life in the attempt. Solomon's many marriages were disastrous for the entire nation of Israel, as they paved the way for idolatry.

Old Testament polygamy can be summed up in the same words that Jesus used to describe divorce: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (Matt. 19:8 NIV).

It is permissible, though, for a man or a woman to remarry in the event of the death of the first spouse: "For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage" (Rom. 7:2 NIV).

Is Divorce Permitted?

The Jews often quarreled about whether divorce was permitted. The law of Moses read: "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, . . . (he) is not allowed to marry her again" (Deut. 24:1-4).

In Jesus' times the rabbis agreed that a man was permitted to divorce his wife, but they did not agree on the phrase "because he finds something indecent about her." Some rabbis believed that this referred to adultery committed by the woman. Others said that it referred to some other fault, such as not taking care of the husband properly or burning his food.

This difference of interpretation was behind the

question addressed to Jesus by the Pharisees: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (Matt. 19:3 NIV). Jesus answered with the following words, so important for marriage: "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:6 NIV). Admittedly, Moses had permitted some men to divorce their wives, but Jesus attributed that to the hardness of their hearts. "It was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman, commits adultery" (Matt. 19:8-9 NIV).

Jesus gives adultery as the only ground for divorce, and that is the rule we must uphold.

What About Broken Marriages?

What about husbands and wives who are constantly at each other's throats? It is true that some marriages seem to have been made in hell rather than in heaven. Professing Christians though, should look for the answer to this problem in Christ who said: "Ask and you shall receive." Marriages in which husbands and wives genuinely pray for one another cannot be broken. This does not mean that every Christian marriage is necessarily an ideal marriage. Christians also have their sins and shortcomings and not all Christians complement each other in the way intended for marriage. But it is nonetheless true that Christ can also heal broken marriages. There is the touching story told by the great church father Augustine in his *Confessions* Book IX, about the marriage of his believing mother Monica, to the heathen Patricius: ". . . She served him as her lord; and did her diligence to win him unto Thee, preaching Thee unto him by her conversation; by which Thou ornamentedst her, making her reverently amiable, and admirable unto her husband. And she so endured the wronging of her bed as never to have any quarrel with her husband thereon. For she looked for Thy mercy upon him, that believing in Thee, he might be chaste. But besides this, he was fervid, as in his affections, so in anger: but she had learnt not to resist an angry husband, not in deed only, but not even in word. Only when he was smoothed and tranquil, and in a temper to receive it, she would give an account of her actions, if haply he had overhastily taken offence. In a word, while many matrons, who had milder husbands, yet bore even in their faces marks of shame, would in familiar talk blame their husband's lives, she would blame their tongues, giving them, as in jest, earnest advice: 'That from the time they heard the marriage writings read to them,

they should account them as indentures, whereby they were made servants; and so, remembering their condition, ought not to set themselves up against their lords . . .'

Finally, her own husband, towards the very end of his earthly life, did she gain unto Thee; nor had she to complain of that in him as a believer, which before he was a believer she had borne from him."

Dating and Engagement

How does a man find his wife? How does a girl find a husband? There are cultures in

which marriages are arranged by family and a husband and wife do not meet until their wedding day. Things are a little different here and men and women are free to meet and date. This freedom is not to be abused, however.

There are those who do treat it lightly, making it a habit to date as much as possible. If you indiscriminately date anyone, you lower your standards and lose a certain amount of sincerity. The ultimate purpose of dating should be marriage, and we should not be afraid to admit that this is so, for marriage is God's ultimate gift of communion to us. It is possible that, after a period of dating, a couple will come to the mutual conclusion that they were not meant for each other. But dating was not meant to be one flirtation after another.

During dating and engagement trust should be present. It should be a time period in which a couple discovers how to please each other, accept each other and grow towards one another. Engaged couples, and those dating, have to respect the fact, however, that they are not yet married. The Bible says that God has reserved that specialness of becoming one flesh for marriage—not before that time.

Unchastity

The catechism says that "all unchastity is accursed by God."

What is unchastity? It comes from the word "chaste," which means "pure" or "virtuous." Thus unchastity is anything that can make our bodies impure.

Our bodies have hidden drives and emotions; rage and passions which are sometimes very hard to control. To give in to these leads to unchaste living.

Unchastity, or immorality, can be stimulated by suggestive films. God has placed shame in our hearts and has given us clothing to cover our nakedness. Pornographic movies, however,

stimulate lust and break the seventh commandment. There are magazines with seductive centerfolds leaving nothing to the imagination. There are "dirty jokes" spicing the mind with indecent thoughts. Men and women who prize their God-given modesty, will avoid such films, literature and talk at all costs.

Not to avoid these temptations is like playing with fire. It delights the devil, for through this he can corrupt the temple of the Holy Spirit which is built in our bodies. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (I Cor. 6:19 and 20 NIV).

For Adults

There has always been a difference of opinion on whether or not adultery is the only basis Scripture gives for divorce. What about desertion? Some people stress Jesus' words that only adultery serves as the basis for divorce. Others appeal to I Corinthians 7:13-15: "And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy" (NIV).

These people feel that while Christ forbids divorce except on the grounds of adultery, Paul adds to this that, if the unbelieving spouse breaks the marriage bond, the believing spouse may be considered free to marry again.

Generally speaking, people have wanted to give a person who has been willfully deserted, and whose attempts at reconciliation have come to nothing, permission to remarry.

Our churches generally consider adultery the only legitimate ground for divorce, although for practical reasons, desertion is not considered an illegitimate ground.

The Roman Catholic Church, with regard to priests and nuns, depreciates the value of marriage, requiring them to remain celibate. They must make a vow of *chastity*, which means that they are not to marry. From this, one might conclude that a married person is unchaste or at least less chaste than those who remain unmarried.

We should note, however, that Peter and the other apostles were married (I Cor. 9:5). Furthermore, the Lord Himself emphasized that it is not good for man to be alone. Finally not everyone who chooses a spiritual office is given the strength to re-

main unmarried.

The Roman Catholic Church has suffered a great deal of misery because of this arbitrary regulation concerning celibacy. In fact, one of the differences leading to the rupture between the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox church was that of celibacy, for the Greek Orthodox church allowed its priests to marry. As well, many of the bad situations existing within the Roman Catholic Church prior to the Reformation can be traced to the rule of celibacy, which not even some of the popes saw fit to uphold.

How do we, then, interpret the following texts: "It is good for a man not to marry" (I Cor. 7:1 NIV) and, "He who married a virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better" (I Cor. 7:38 NIV). Both must be read within the context of the entire chapter which deals with a large number of marital issues. Dr. Grosheide summarized it in the following words: "Marriage is an institution of God. Everyone is called to marry. When sin entered the world, a great change took place. On the one hand, marriage now became a necessity, if simply to help counter injustice. On the other hand, it prevented a person from separating himself totally from this world and dedicating himself entirely to the service of God. It is only to a few that God has given the special grace not to feel the need to get married and instead to give themselves entirely to Him. It is only in these cases of special grace that marriage may be excluded for the service of God."

On the Textbook

1. What was the situation in which Joseph found himself?
2. How did he respond? To whom was Joseph ultimately being obedient (Genesis 39:9)?
3. Where did marriage originate? How?
4. What does the "remarkable creation of woman" teach us?
5. What purposes of marriage are found in Genesis 2:18?
6. What is monogamy? bigamy? polygamy? What is the Bible's teaching about these practices?
7. What opinions did the rabbis of Jesus' day have about the meaning of "something indecent"? (Check Deuteronomy 24:1-4.)
8. Why had Moses permitted divorce?
9. Are broken marriages beyond repair? How can they be healed?

10. How did Augustine's mother handle her difficult marriage?
11. How ought we to look at dating and engagement?
12. What is unchastity? How can we avoid temptation to the sin of unchastity?
13. How ought we to think of our bodies, also in terms of our sexuality? (See I Corinthians 6:19, 20.)

On the Bible

1. Read Proverbs 7. Where did the young man walk (v. 8)? Why? Why was it at twilight (v. 9)? What kinds of things did the adulterous woman say to him in order to seduce him? Read verses 22 and 23. What images does the writer use to describe what happened to the young man? Does this passage relate only to the sin of adultery, or do other sexual sins follow a similar pattern? Does sexual sin have power? Does Proverbs 7 describe real life, or is it out of touch?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Paul is talking about Christian freedom. But what are the dangers that come along with our freedom? For what is the body meant? How does Paul show the importance of the body in God's eyes (vss. 14, 15, 19, 20)? What is one devastating characteristic of sexual sin (v. 18b)? Are you precious to God? How can you know that, from this passage? What is the price Paul speaks about in verse 20?

For Discussion

1. "We have to drop our Puritan ideas about sex. They come out of a different century. Prostitution is really harmless—a person sells certain services to another person who wants to buy them—both the prostitute and the client are satisfied. As for masturbation, experts say it is therapeutic for handling the sex drive. No one is hurt. Engaged couples about to be married may begin to have sexual relations. They are fully committed to each other." What do you think? Does the Bible help you to come to grips with these issues? Mention some passages. Sex apart from marriage is very common today. What is the Christian's response? What is God's claim on your sexuality?
2. How ought Christians to see divorce and remarriage? If we take Jesus at His word (Luke 16:18), there is no opportunity for remarriage. But aren't we forcing Christians to live lives of sadness and frustration if we maintain what Jesus said, and refuse to allow them to remarry?

Lord's Day XLII

Illustration: **I Kings 21**

The eighth commandment protects a person's belongings. The sixth commandment deals with his life, the seventh with his spouse, and now the eighth deals with his goods, protecting them from being unlawfully stolen away from him.

One of the most heinous deeds ever committed by the Old Testament King Ahab, whose duty it was to protect the rights of his subjects, was his unlawful expropriation of the property of a faithful subject. In so doing, King Ahab became a common thief.

Naboth was a loyal Israelite and he was Ahab's neighbor in the city of Jezreel. He was a good neighbor because he feared the Lord, and if the fear of the Lord is written on your heart, you cannot help but be a good neighbor.

Love for his neighbor, however, was not one of Ahab's attributes, for he did not fear the Lord. He coveted Naboth's plot of land, desiring to turn it into a vegetable garden close to the palace. He thought Naboth would not mind being paid a reasonable amount of money for the land, or perhaps being given a better vineyard somewhere else.

However, because Naboth was a God-fearing man, he could not accept Ahab's proposition. His ancestors had lived on this land since Israel had occupied Canaan, and he considered it an inheritance given by God. The land was more than private property; it was holy property. God Himself had decreed that this land should only be sold in time of a great need and had instituted the year of Jubilee so it could revert back to the original owner. "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan (Lev. 25:10 NIV). The year of Jubilee was that joyful year in which impoverished Israelites were to be given back all their possessions. Naboth did not dare sell the inheritance of his ancestors even to the king, for over and above King Ahab stood the King of Kings.

When Naboth refused, Ahab became a thief and a murderer. True, he had help from his proud,

pagan wife, Jezebel, who plotted Naboth's downfall. But Ahab was an accomplice. He allowed the plot and subsequent murder to happen. Not stopping it, he bore the greatest responsibility.

Jezebel manipulated events in such a way that Naboth was falsely accused of cursing both God and the king. Although these were known to be gross lies, Israel was so corrupt at this time that no one dared to come to Naboth's defense. He was stoned by his fellow countrymen.

Ahab promptly took possession of Naboth's vineyard. It seemed that he had what he wanted. But then the Word of God came to Ahab, thief and murderer, through Elijah the prophet. "In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!" (I Kings 21:19 NIV). Ahab would discover all too soon that there was a righteous Judge in heaven above.

To Whom Does Our Property Belong?

Naboth was very well aware of the fact that his land did not, in effect, belong to him. He also knew that he could not do with it as he pleased. He, and his ancestors before him, had received it from God—God the One who owns all. " 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the Lord Almighty" (Hag. 2:8 NIV). To God, and Him alone, belong all things.

How Do We Obtain Our Possessions?

When God created the world He gave mankind Paradise to live in, but He also gave them dominion over the entire earth.

This gift was not unconditional. Man had to work for it. The Lord said: "Fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28 NIV), and He put man in the Garden of Eden "to work it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:15 NIV).

The mandate to work was emphasized more after man's fall into sin; the earth had become difficult and painful to work. God then said: "Cursed

is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field” (Gen. 3:17-19 NIV).

God meant for us to inherit the earth through work and He blesses this. People who think it would be desirable to go through life without working are deceived. Those who are too lazy to work lose purpose, becoming dull to themselves and others. Work is a blessing.

A second way to obtain goods is through inheritance. Parents and children form a community, and children inherit goods from their parents. In the Old Testament, Naboth was a good example.

A third way to obtain goods is by discovery. A person can unexpectedly come across something that does not belong to anyone else, such as a treasure, oil on his property, or the mother lode in an abandoned mine. While people tend to thank their lucky stars, it would be more to the point to thank God.

No Equal Share

The idea that all must share equally of the world’s wealth is a human idea. Communism puts this into word but not deeds. In Russia great disparities exist between rich and poor.

If God had created all people equal, and if sin had not entered the world, we would all be equally rich. But God made people different and Jesus teaches us that some people are given five talents, others two, and still others only one.

A great divergence of spiritual and material gifts exists in the world. This inequality has been created by God. Admittedly, sin has intensified this inequality, and the screaming disparity between the exceedingly rich and the abjectly poor in the world should never cease to trouble us. In Israel God decreed laws to help prevent poverty and also laws which, if poverty should gain the upper hand, would put an end to it. The law concerning the year of Jubilee was already mentioned. There was also the law of the year of the Sabbath, which stated that every seventh year the land had to lie fallow and that whatever grew on it was for the poor.

A beautiful message can be found in Deuteronomy 15:7-11. “If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: ‘The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts, is near,’ so that you do not show

ill-will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.”

Stewards

Nothing we have is ever completely our own. Everything belongs to God—the quarter in a child’s piggybank or the capital investment of a millionaire. One day we will have to give an account to God for all those things He has entrusted to us. We can either serve Him with our talents or exploit them selfishly for our own gain.

Evil Practices

The catechism says that God forbids theft and robbery and that these are punished by “the magistrate.” It is obvious that someone who commits robbery breaks the law and sins, as does the pickpocket. The worst part of theft is not that the thief grows richer on someone else’s bank account, but rather that the victim, his neighbor, who may have worked hard for his money, will have to suffer great inconvenience or poverty.

There are other practices, though, which are bad and never come to light. For example, if an employer does not pay his employee fairly, he, in effect, steals from that employee. By the same token, if that employee does not work as hard as he can, he steals from his employer. A business man advertising high quality goods but selling poor quality, steals from his customers. People who buy on time and never pay their bills steal from their suppliers. Church members who contribute little or nothing to the church quota, budget or mission work, things that are necessary for the coming of God’s kingdom, steal from the church of the Lord.

God repeatedly asks us: How did you get it? And—what are you going to do with it?

Avarice and Waste

People can place too great an emphasis on money without stealing. *Avarice* is the desire to get and keep money believing that it will make you

happy. People who are avaricious make money, or mammon, their god, forgetting that Jesus said: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy" (Matt. 6:19 NIV).

There are not many visible Scrooges anymore, or people who hoard their money, hiding it away in old socks; but there are still a lot of people around who worship their bankbooks and assets, giving little or nothing to those who need it.

In contrast, *waste* is the using up or frivolous spending of money without need. Some people buy things on credit without any prudent forethought as to whether they will be able to make the payments. Other people are overly generous, giving away money without considering the needs of their own families. Neither of these has any real sense of financial responsibility.

Eternal Tabernacles Jesus once mentioned an eternal reward for those who make good use of their earthly possessions. That reward is grace, as mentioned in Lord's Day 24 of the catechism. Commenting on wise use of earthly possessions, Jesus once said: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9 NIV).

Worldly wealth is money. Money changes hands many times and is often used for evil purposes. Jesus says to use worldly wealth, or money, to gain friends for yourselves by which He meant that we should help our neighbors as much as we can. These acts of charity will not be forgotten, for the people who were helped will still remember what you did in heaven. They will greet you there with great joy because you were a friend not only in word but also in deed. Your reward will be great in heaven.

For Adults The nineteenth century was the age of *Liberalism*. Liberalism was a result of the French Revolution (1789), ushering in a period of nominal freedom which in reality meant little more than slavery for thousands of people.

People were free to do as they wanted. Care for the needy was neglected. Woman and children were forced to work under abominable conditions. Wages were too low to live on, and too high to die on.

In reaction to Liberalism came *Communism*, a modified form of which was socialism. *Socialism*

did not support the freedom gospel of liberalism, instead maintaining that everything should be subject to an all-powerful state which represented society as a whole. The most extreme form of communism repudiates the existence of God (atheism) and proclaims a purely materialistic doctrine. The most moderate form of socialism would like to cooperate with Christians as long as they do not insist that the Word of God is the only rule for all of life.

Even this moderate form of socialism, though, threatens freedom. It wants to place the manufacturing of goods totally into the hands of the government, which eventually could make human life completely dependent on the government.

It is therefore, absolutely necessary to safeguard the independence of the church and all other spheres in society that are not directly subject to government but instead owe their existence and their mandate to God Himself. This is the concept of sphere sovereignty.

On the Textbook

1. Why couldn't Naboth just do what Ahab wanted?
2. What was the year of Jubilee?
3. How did Ahab get Naboth's vineyard?
4. What was God's judgment?
5. Name the three ways in which we may gain possessions, according to the book.
6. Why doesn't everyone in the world get the same amount of possessions? What does the author say about that inequality?
7. How did God expect Israel to deal with her poor?
8. What is a steward? What is the difference between being a steward and being an owner?
9. Mention five "evil practices which often do not come to light." Add a few that you thought of on your own.
10. What is "avarice"? What kinds of things qualify as "wasting money"?
11. How does the author explain Luke 16:9?

On the Bible

1. Proverbs 30:7-10. What does Agur ask of the Lord? Why doesn't he want riches? Why then doesn't he want to be poor? What is Agur saying? To whom is money more of a temptation—to the rich, or to the poor? Read what Moses said to Israel in Deuteronomy 8:12-18. Was he right? Read Job 1:9-22. How did the devil try to tempt Job? Was he successful?
2. We have learned something of what it means to break this commandment. Read the following passages, and describe how we can *fulfill* this commandment in new obedience. Read Isaiah 58:1-10; Matthew 7:12; Matthew 25:31-46; Galatians 6:9-10; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

For Discussion

1. "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). How should we understand Paul's words? Does he rule out welfare, unemployment insurance, or even benevolence? Why do we need to eat?
2. "Work is a necessary evil. If I didn't have to, I wouldn't lift a finger. I can't wait to get home from work, go on vacation, relax on the weekend. Work is just an interruption of pleasure." What is your opinion about work? Is it a curse? What idea does our society seem to have about work? Think about working conditions in factories, or on assembly lines. Is work a blessing under these conditions? How can it be? How would you improve people's ideas about work?

Lord's Day XLIII

Illustration: The ninth commandment forbids lying. Lying is disgusting and cowardly; yet even believers commit this sin at times. Think of Abraham when he went down to Egypt to escape famine.

Just prior to this he had shown great courage by leaving his country and paternal home without knowing where God was leading him. But when the land of Canaan was devastated by a famine, he fled to Egypt, hoping to find food for his people and livestock, yet also knowing that the Egyptians had some strange customs.

Perhaps he knew of a decree which stated that a foreigner visiting Egypt might have to forfeit his wife and children to Pharaoh. The Egyptian Pharaoh had several wives in his harem and research from this time period has shown that this Pharaoh favored Syrian women.

Abraham was not completely at ease on this journey to Egypt. He did not dare trust God fully, and for this reason felt compelled to fabricate a story. Even though the story was partially true, it was also partially not true, and therefore, a lie.

Abraham said to Sarah, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say: 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you" (Gen. 12:12 NIV).

It was a foolish idea! He should have known that while this contrivance might save him his life, it certainly wouldn't do Sarah any good! It was a half-truth, for Sarah was indeed Abraham's half-sister (Gen. 20:12). The information also suggested, however, that Sarah was not Abraham's wife, which she was.

It was this half-truth which created problems. Sarah was taken away to Pharaoh's palace, and Pharaoh treated Abraham well for her sake. Abraham, however, was miserable because he had lost his wife. Yet, even though it was his own fault, God did not forsake him. He inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household, forcing Pharaoh to investigate until he arrived at the truth.

Abraham, the father of all believers, left Egypt. Despite the fact that he carried Pharaoh's previous gifts, he was burdened with a heavy sense of guilt and shame. Branding himself a liar, he had compromised the honor of God's great name.

The Easiest Sin Nothing is easier than a lie. As Abraham invented a story to save his own skin, so do we all. The tongue is fast. To say "yes" when it should be "no," or "no" when it should be "yes," is not difficult; to pull the wool over someone's eyes in order not to get blamed for something, is easy. Words are always available and can be used as you will, also to lie.

The Most Cowardly Sin Lying is a cowardly sin, and no honest person will avail himself of its use.

The catechism identifies lying as "the proper works of the devil." The devil knows better than anyone what lying is, for it is his second nature. He began lying in Paradise when he tempted people into sin by twisting the truth.

He told Adam and Eve that the fruit, forbidden by God, was really good to eat. He persuaded them that by eating of the fruit they would become like God, while in fact they would forfeit their covenant with God.

The devil lies continually. Whatever is beautiful, he presents as ugly, or a burden, or not worth the trouble. Whatever is ugly, he presents as beautiful, or as a challenge, certainly not as sin. When you succumb to his lies, he laughs and you are sorry.

What difference does one small lie make? It won't hurt anyone, and it will help you right now. However, the lie will come back at you later. One lie leads to another, and, before you know it, you are caught in several, entrapped through your own doing. Your peace of mind has gone.

The vicious nature of this sin lies in the harm it can do to one's neighbor. When someone bears a

grudge against his neighbor, it is easy to spread rumors about him. In the early period of the church, pagans rumored that Christians committed crimes. They were said to be conspirators, that they drank the blood of little children, and conducted themselves in lewd and immoral behavior.

An old hand-drawn print dating back to the Secession, shows seceders who had fled to America talking piously with each other, all the while backstabbing other people.

We must always be careful not to believe everything we hear about other people, especially when it is said behind their backs. People are quick to talk and usually add a line or two themselves.

Slander and Backbiting Slander is the spreading of false statements about someone, harmful to that person's character or reputation.

Backbiting is maliciously speaking evil about someone who is not present. Although the information may be true, gloating over someone else's sin will not edify anyone. If we know someone has sinned, Jesus asks us to discuss it with only that person, perhaps in this way preventing further sin.

Lying as the Easy Way Out Sometimes people lie out of sheer laziness. They want to be rid of someone or something, without any trouble. For example, if someone comes to the door, and the occupant has neither the time nor the inclination to see the visitor, the message is passed on, "Tell him I'm not home." This gets rid of the visitor but it takes a lie to do it. If a child is late for school, it is easy for him to tell the teacher: "I missed the bus." Someone who hasn't learned his catechism, may well be tempted to say he was sick, or forgot about it completely.

Lies indicate weak character, and pave the way for bigger lies.

Lies Caused by Greed Lying could possibly earn you a lot of money. At the bottom of the tax return, people are required to sign words to the effect of: "To the best of my knowledge, the above information is correct."

However, many people fill in figures that are not accurate, in order to avoid paying more taxes. Similarly, a merchant can promote poor merchandise, or a tradesman can promise to come the

following day and then postpone coming indefinitely.

The saying "business is business" seems to imply that honesty is not important. A good businessman, however, will give honesty priority. His reputation should be of greater value to him than a small, short-term profit.

Lying Out of Necessity People may be forced to lie in order to save their own lives or that of someone else. Abraham lied to Pharaoh. David lied to Achish (I Sam. 27). And Peter lied when he denied Jesus.

Lies to save one's own life are still in conflict with the ninth commandment. But the matter becomes more difficult when it concerns the lives of our neighbors.

The Dutch were often confronted with this problem during the German occupation between 1940 and 1945. Many people, especially young people, were forced to go underground. Also, when people hid Jews they knew that if the Germans discovered them it would mean death. It was no seldom occurrence that people lied to the Germans.

Farmers were required by the Germans to give an accurate account of all their stocks and supplies. However, when they reported less than they actually had they were able to help those who were starving.

Some said that anything done against the Germans was justifiable. This was not true, for God's commandments also remain valid during times of occupation. The real issue was different. It can be compared to stealing out of necessity. In Proverbs 6:30 we read: "Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving" (NIV). This passage says that it is possible and understandable for a person to do something which might ordinarily not be legal. In other words, one has to consider the circumstances. It does not mean, however, that this person is totally without guilt because the words follow: "Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house" (Prov. 9:31 NIV).

This passage can be interpreted to mean that the law may, of necessity, sometimes be broken, even though looking back, it will be clear that the law did not lose its validity. It really depends on what the necessity is. During the German occupation people strongly felt that the Germans were choking the life out of their nation and murdering the entire Jewish people. They were convinced that not a single person should be an accessory to this crime by providing the Germans with helpful information.

Exodus 1 was often used as an example. Here we read that the Jewish midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, lied to the Egyptians to save the lives of Jewish male infants. We also read that they were blessed by the Lord. In Joshua 2:1ff we read about Rahab, and in II Samuel 17:20 we read about the woman in Bahurim, both of whom lied to protect the lives of people in hiding.

In normal circumstances, so-called emergency lies cannot be justified. However, under certain abnormal circumstances, a person may find that he has to forego telling the truth in order to obey the ninth commandment, that is, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Wisdom We should certainly not always say everything we think. Proverbs 17:27 reads: "A man of knowledge uses words with restraint" (NIV).

Imagine a very sick man asking his doctor whether he is going to die. It could be necessary for the doctor to answer yes. But it could also be that if the doctor does not encourage his patient, that man will give up all hope of recovery, thus aggravating his condition. The doctor needs wisdom to find the right words.

In trying to convince a non-church goer of Christ's love and the need for him to have the fellowship of the church, it is not wise to speak angrily, or to point accusingly at his sins.

In Athens, the apostle Paul handled it differently. He began by praising the people for their religious sensitivity. Paul knew how to be a Jew for the Jews and a Greek for the Greeks (Acts 17:15ff).

We must ask God to give us wisdom in our dealings with other people.

Love We will grow in such wisdom if we listen to Jesus, who taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves. If we listen to that advice, we will be glad when we hear praiseworthy things about other people and equally glad to pass these things on. How wonderfully kind it was of Barnabas to have introduced Saul, the persecutor of the church, to the other apostles telling them that he had become a disciple.

"Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (I Cor. 13:6-7 NIV).

For Adults When people talk about *conventional* lies, they refer to the hypocrisy people often use in day-to-day living. Although someone may smile and say "welcome," he could very well be thinking "I wish you had stayed home." Or, in writing a letter, people address someone else with "dear," while in actual fact they are not fond of that person at all.

There are extremists who think that it is better to scrap all convention and always say exactly what they think. That is not quite right, however. No doubt, honesty is a virtue and we should not say things that we don't really mean. Let us not forget, though, that good relationships among people are a gift of God's common grace. If we were to say exactly what was on our minds whenever we felt like it, the danger to succumb to unnecessary gossip and slander would be great. Because people are image-bearers of God, we must respect them, showing in our words that we do so. None of us is perfect and we should always remember that in our judgment of others.

For good relationships and common courtesy, certain established conventions are necessary, but they should never become all-important, stifling real feelings.

Some people also object to so-called *practical jokes*. These can, of course, be taken too far. Feelings can be seriously hurt and people can be terribly embarrassed. April 1, the day for practical jokes, can be a day of good, clean fun. Not to have it would be a loss, especially for small children who love playing harmless jokes on teachers and parents. Comedy and humor are gifts that can often blissfully relieve the tensions of an otherwise stressful life.

On the Textbook

1. What did Abraham think would happen when he went into Egypt?
2. How did he "solve" the problem? What was the result?
3. How was Abraham rescued from the trouble he had created?
4. Why does the catechism identify lying as "the devices the devil himself uses" (or: "the proper work of the devil")?
5. How might lying make you lose your peace of mind?
6. What kind of harm can be done to our neighbor when we lie?

7. What is "slander"? What is "gossip"?
8. What are some of the times we are tempted to use "easy lies"?
9. What are some greedy lies?
10. How did some Dutch people lie during the Second World War? Was it wrong? Was it necessary?
11. The book says, "We must ask God to give us wisdom in our dealings with other people." Are there times in your life when you have to treat the truth with wisdom, perhaps in your dealings with friends?

On the Bible

1. Look at the way this commandment is recorded in Exodus 20:16 and in Deuteronomy 5:20. In which table of the law is it found? Which great commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) summarizes this table of the law? What is God's first concern in this commandment—the neighbor, or the "facts"? Does "false" refer only to what is not factual, or is there a different way of being false witnesses? What precious possession of our neighbor are we handling when we talk about him? How does God expect us to handle that precious possession? Check 1 Peter 3:8, and 4:8. What does it mean that "love covers a multitude of sins"?
2. Read James 3:1-12. "If anyone is never at fault in what he says," what is that person? To which things does James compare the tongue? Why? What is the tongue, according to verse 8? How much damage can your tongue do to your life, according to verse 6? Is James right? Is the tongue really this dangerous and flammable in our lives? What is James' judgment for our "forked tongues"? What is God saying to us in verses 10-12?

For Discussion

1. What do you think God expects you to do with the truth
 - when you find that a good friend is abusing drugs or alcohol?
 - when you discover that your brother or sister is sexually active outside of marriage?
 - when you know that a friend's father is physically abusing her?
 - when you and your friend are being considered for the same spot on the team, and the coach wants your opinion of your friend's skills?
 - when you are being interviewed for a job, and you have to explain why you were fired from your last job?
 - when you've been out doing things you know you shouldn't, and your parents want to know?
 - when the due date for an assignment comes, and you haven't started it yet, and you have to explain to the teacher why you want an extension?

Lord's Day XLIV

Illustration

Have you ever heard of St. Anthony? In the Roman Catholic church, the stories of saints are told very often. Sometimes people are better acquainted with their lives than they are with the Bible itself. In Reformed circles, it's just the other way around—most of us know very little about the lives of the saints.

There is a lot to be learned, though, from many of these lives. Although we do not need them as intercessors, having only one Mediator, many of them were great figures in the history of God's church, accomplishing amazing things.

St. Anthony was the father of the anchorites (hermits) in the Egyptian desert. Although he lost his parents at an early age, his worries were few, for they had left him a sizeable inheritance. At the age of twenty, he heard a sermon about the rich young ruler, which contained the following text: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me." This passage made a deep impression on him. He felt it spoke to him personally and gave all his belongings away, except for a small sum of money which he reserved for his younger sister.

He interpreted Jesus' message to mean that he should withdraw from all human society. Accordingly, he withdrew first to the edge of his village, then to a cave and finally, to the desert.

What did Anthony hope to find in his isolation? He wanted to become perfect, to commit no more sins. To accomplish this, he deprived his body of comfort. He ate and drank as little as possible, trying to fix his mind only on God.

Did he succeed? Could he escape sin by fleeing the world and tormenting his body? The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle once wrote: "The world pursues me always, whether I go or stay, or turn my eyes away." Anthony discovered this to be true. His autobiographer, Athanasius, records astonishing occurrences within his soul.

Living on the outskirts of his native village, he felt himself surrounded by phantom figures which tried to deter him from his objective. He found he

could not master his desires. He yearned for the social contact of other people, especially his sister. He coveted money and repeatedly hungered for good food and drink. He dreamed about beautiful women who tried to lure him out of his isolation.

Later, in the cave, he felt himself surrounded by demons. They tormented and challenged him so that he suffered indescribable pain. In his mind's eye, they changed into lions and bears, leopards and wild bulls, snakes and scorpions. Their clamor was alarming and they did not cease to threaten him. The mediaeval Dutch painter Hieronymous Bosch immortalized these temptations in a painting that ranks among the most famous in the world.

The point to these stories, aside from the fact that they all contain an element of truth, is that man cannot avoid sin, especially the sin of coveting. Coveting is second nature to all of us, and the desire for other things will stay with us until we die.

Centuries later, the famous monk Martin Luther was born. Like Anthony, he wanted to lead a holy life. Fleeing the world he entered a monastery. Although he observed the monastic rule stricter than anyone else, chastising himself to the point of collapse, he did not find rest for his soul. He was very well aware of the fact that perfection required him to think only of God—and he knew too that despite all his intensity and exertion, he had not achieved this perfection.

Luther was tormented by the feeling that he would be damned. It smothered him as Anthony had been overwhelmed by his demonic visions.

"I also know a man," Luther wrote later, "who said that he had often been tormented by trials such as these, though admittedly for short periods of time. Trials which are so dreadful and hellish that no tongue can speak of them nor any pen describe them; and anyone who has not himself experienced them, will never believe their agony. If such an affliction had lasted only half an hour, or even a tenth of an hour, he would have been destroyed completely, and his bones would have turned into ashes. No escape is possible, no comfort exists for it, neither internal nor external; no, there is nothing but accusations, accusations from all sides."

Nothing But Accusations It is precisely the tenth commandment which confronts us with Luther's complaint: nothing but accusations. The apostle Paul once discussed this with fear and trembling. In Romans 7 he speaks of the meaning of the law and says that it is through the law that we learn to know sin. People are inclined to think, as the rich young ruler did, "I can keep the law." But, says Paul, what about the desire? Can you control your desires? If the law says to you: "You shall not covet," it is as if you are challenged to desire everything, and the reason is your sinful human nature.

Desiring is inevitable—almost as if there is an inner law compelling us to do what we should not. Paul speaks of a dual law. The one is the perfect, holy law of God; the other is the law of sin, a law "within my members," opposing God's law, prodding me to follow my own desires. When Paul thinks of that law, he calls himself "a wretched man." But he does not stop here, joyfully going on to say: "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:24 and 25 NIV).

Is All Desire Sinful? We should not conclude that desire is not allowed at all, for then who could live? The tenth commandment does not say: "You shall not covet," but, "You shall not covet what belongs to your neighbor." In coveting, the heart reaches out to something else. If the heart reaches out to God, that is good. If you desire only to fulfill God's law, that is good also. Some people say you may not covet at all, and that all desire should be killed, for it was through this that evil came into the world.

Buddhists consider meditation the highest stage on the road to perfection—to sit still, legs crossed, breathing controlled with absolutely nothing on your mind. This, they say, is Nirvana, the state of perfect blessedness achieved by the extinction of all desires and passions. This is not a Christian view. A Christian may desire. He may desire with all his heart to fulfill God's commandments. There is nothing wrong with desiring to make something of your life, to strive to become something or to fulfill an ideal—as long as this is done for the glory of God and the good of your neighbor.

The Most Profound Commandment When you think of it this way, the tenth commandment reveals its true depth. It envelops all the other commandments, demonstrating the unity of the law.

Every commandment must be kept with regard to the tenth commandment. Jesus shows this clearly in connection with the seventh commandment: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27 NIV).

The tenth commandment emphasizes the fact that God always demands our hearts.

How Is This Possible? If a man like the apostle Paul was already "a prisoner of the law of sin," what about us? Is our situation hopeless? Does the law merely say that we are sinners and will always be sinners?

We know that is not so, for at the end of his confession, Paul also exclaimed: "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25 NIV). The law must always let us see and confess our sinfulness. It is easy to forget that we are sinners and we tend to think of ourselves as always having the best of intentions. This is why it is good to have the law; every commandment, relative to the tenth commandment, makes us painfully aware of our shortcomings, compelling us to flee to Christ.

The law always tries to convince us that our refuge is in our Lord Jesus Christ and that we must always glory in His cross.

Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there, that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.

The beautiful thing about our redemption is that Jesus has fulfilled the law for us and has borne the punishment we deserved. Whoever believes in Him does not have to be afraid of the law. This, however, does not finish the matter.

Jesus never told us to go ahead and sin, because He would always forgive. But He did say: "Strive to enter by the narrow gate," indicating our lifestyle. The comforting aspect of this way of life is that we do not have to earn our own salvation—Jesus has already done that for us. We may follow Jesus, who forgives us our sins, throughout our lives.

He does ask us, however, to fight against sin. Through His Holy Spirit He gives us the power to do this, and it is only through the power of the Holy

Spirit that we can accomplish anything at all.

The catechism calls this “a small beginning of obedience,” but it is, nevertheless, a beginning. On the day of judgment it will be spoken of.

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger 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 . . . Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:35, 36 and 40 NIV).

For Adults People have tried to interpret the law in two ways, both of which differ from what God intended.

There are and always have been *perfectionists*, who maintain that a Christian can fulfill the whole law. There is the well-known example of a nineteenth century Dutch minister who once said: “Congregation—this year has been a sinless one for me.” Of this the Bible says: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (I John 1:8 NIV). Perfectionists draw on a different text from the same epistle which says: “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God” (I John 3:9 NIV). It is clear, however, that John would not contradict himself. When he speaks of a person “who is born of God,” he is referring to regeneration. A regenerated person, John says, does not sin. This does not mean that he is perfect, but that the sin he commits is not done by him as a regenerated person. In Romans 7:16 and 17 Paul states it in this way: “And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me” (NIV).

A believer, therefore, cannot sin and does not sin inasmuch as he stands in faith and is the temple of the Holy Spirit. But he can never achieve this fully in this life, for within him there will always remain something of his “old nature.”

There are those who not only say that you *cannot* keep the law, but that you *do not have* to keep it. They were the ones Paul addressed when he said: “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” (Rom. 6:1 NIV). There seem to have been people like that in the congregation of Thyatira. Led by a surrogate prophetess, (Rev. 2:18-29) they committed adultery and fornication and ate meat offered to idols. Their reasoning was that sin had to be experienced, that they had to learn “satan’s so-called deep secrets” (Rev. 2:24 NIV).

In Revelation 2:18-29, Jesus denounced such views, and in Galatians 5:13-14, Paul wrote the following: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in the single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (NIV).

On the Textbook

1. Who was St. Anthony? What does “anchorite” mean?
2. What made Anthony change his life drastically?
3. Why did he isolate himself? What else did he do?
4. What did he discover? What kinds of creatures surrounded him?
5. What is the “point” of these stories?
6. Whose experiences, centuries later, were similar to Anthony’s?
7. What was he tormented by?
8. Is coveting wrong in itself? Explain.
9. What is the Buddhist’s highest stage of perfection? How do they reach it?
10. What is to be the focus of our desire?
11. How did Jesus show that the seventh commandment, for example, must be observed with regard to the tenth commandment?
12. Name two important things that the law does for Christians.
13. Who does the catechism say has “a small beginning of obedience”?

On the Bible

1. Read Matthew 5:17-48. What did Jesus come to do to the “law and the prophets”? What does Jesus mean in what He says about murder? Is there anyone, besides Jesus, who has not, or will not commit adultery, according to verse 28? What is Jesus teaching in verses 28 and 29? What is the “righteousness that surpasses the scribes’ and Pharisees’”? What does God want from His people, that the Pharisees would not give?

2. Read James 1:19-27. "Everyone should be" what? Why? What can save us (v. 21)? What must we do besides listening to the Word? What is it like if we only listen, but don't do the word? What does the perfect law give? What will happen to one who hears and does? How might we deceive ourselves? What are some ways we can hear and do, according to the last verses of this chapter? Are these the only ways? What is James driving at?

For Discussion

1. Christ has freed us from the law. James talks about the perfect law of liberty. Isn't law really the opposite of freedom? Isn't the catechism really just laying the law like a yoke on Christians, in Lord's Day 44?
2. Look at Q & A 115. Why do we need to know our sinfulness "more"? What have "praying and striving" got to do with the Christian life? Why do we have to wait until after this life to reach our goal? Isn't our sinfulness just an excuse not to give up our desires? Shouldn't we be able, once we have the Spirit, to conquer all sin in our lives?

Lord's Day XLV

Illustration: **Daniel 6**

"Why is prayer necessary for Christians?" This question introduces the last part of the catechism which is made up of eight Lord's Days dealing with prayer. The question might also be phrased this way: "Why can a Christian never cease praying?"

All the believers mentioned in the Bible were people who prayed, and there were many. The first prayers were brought in the form of sacrifices—visible prayers to God. Noah prayed, for he walked with God (Gen. 6:9) and can you walk with someone without talking to him? Abraham prayed, as did Moses and David. The Psalms are nearly all prayers, and how often did not the prophets pray?

There is a story about a prophet who could not stop praying. His name was Daniel and everyone knew that he prayed.

Daniel had grown old serving kings, but even in his old age he was reappointed as grand-vizier in the kingdom of Darius the Mede. Because of his constant prayers, God had given him much wisdom so that he excelled above all the other royal administrators. Like a tall, healthy tree, he towered above the other administrators, goading them to jealousy. They were resentfully envious of "the old Jew's" position.

Several of these jealous men, important administrators and satraps, conspired together for Daniel's downfall. But "they could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (Dan. 6:4 NIV). Finally, though, they hit upon one thing, something that distinguished Daniel from all the other administrators. Daniel had never bowed down to an idol, and he prayed three times a day to a God who, long ago, had been worshipped in the city of Jerusalem.

This had possibilities. They clearly perceived that, although Daniel was prepared to do anything for his king, he would not do something that conflicted with his religion. Working out a plot, these devious counselors, full of hatred for Daniel, went to see Darius. Flattering him they said: "O King

Darius, live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers, and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den."

King Darius fell into their trap. Like any eastern monarch he was very susceptible to flattery. The decree was drawn up—the decree which stated that Daniel was no longer allowed to pray to God. If he disobeyed, he would be thrown into the lions' den, where half-starved, wild animals would tear him to shreds.

It never occurred to Daniel, however, to stop praying. He was not able to stop. The Bible says that *as soon as* he learned of the king's decree, he went home to his upstairs room to pray, just as he had always done, with the windows opened toward Jerusalem.

The rest of the story is well-known. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, but God kept him safe. The indelible truth that Daniel had no choice but to pray, remains. And so it remains for all Christians today. Without prayer they cannot live; they will perish spiritually, because prayer feeds the soul as breath feeds the body.

The Most Important Part of Gratitude

The catechism calls prayer "the chief part of thanksgiving," indicating that there is more thanksgiving. This has already been discussed under the subject of the law. The law is very important, but prayer even more so.

Prayer is the honest admission that we cannot do anything without God. In prayer we surrender ourselves completely to God and give Him the honor. Whoever prays folds his hands, for they were meant to be used in supplication. But folded hands become strong hands. The catechism says that God "will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with hearty sighing unceasingly beg them of Him and thank Him for them."

People who pray receive grace, for God will not ignore prayer. Think of the tax collector in the temple who only pleaded: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13 NIV).

People who pray receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus' parable concerning prayer illustrates this. In it He says that a father will not give a serpent to a child who asks him for a fish, or a scorpion for an egg. "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13 NIV).

Is All Prayer Answered? Christ's message is well worth remembering. There are people who say: "Prayer doesn't help. It changes nothing. It won't give you health or wealth."

Remember, however, that every real prayer is answered by our Lord, in that God gives His grace and Holy Spirit to those who pray. Grace means that when we pray we know that the great and holy God is *our* merciful Father. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we will be able to bear our suffering.

The Holy Spirit can also do much more. He lets us experience miracles daily. His chief role, though, is to enable us to feel compassion and love for others. It was in this way that Jesus lived among other people, sharing their lives. The Spirit will lead us towards God. Travelling that way, with prayer as our constant companions, we shall lack nothing.

How Shall We Pray? We should not pray indiscriminately. Those who are granted an audience with the queen, are first briefed on how to address her and how to conduct themselves. The first thing the catechism teaches us is: "What belongs to such prayer as God is pleased with and will hear?"

God is not an idol. Throughout the world there are literally hundreds of millions of Buddhists, Mohammedans, Hindus, Confucianists and others. Each of these beliefs include prayer and there are people among them who pray often and passionately. Yet their prayers are not heard. Remember the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel. The Baal priests had built their altar and prayed frantically, calling "on the name of Baal from morning till noon 'O Baal, answer us!'" (I Kings 18:26 NIV). Elijah was not impressed and taunting them he said: "Perhaps he is

deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened" (I Kings 18:27 NIV).

The gods of the heathens are no gods, and that is why we must work hard to share with them the good news of the only true God. Only He can hear us wherever we are, understanding us even in silent prayer. We must *humble* ourselves before Him, acknowledging His might and our weakness, His holiness and our sinfulness.

Abraham prayed to the Lord once, saying: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes . . ." (Gen. 18:27 NIV). Moses was told when he approached God "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5 NIV).

Praying is not the easy conversation of a good neighbor. Praying is speaking with the sacred God. That is something we do well to remember. But the catechism continues to tell us that we may speak in the sure knowledge that God will "for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayers, as He has promised us in His Word."

We have a Mediator who has said: "I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 16:23 NIV). Without Jesus no one can approach God, for then God will be a consuming fire. Jesus opens God's Fatherly heart to us.

What Shall We Pray? Jesus tells us to pray to God our Father. Are we allowed to ask for anything at all? No, we may not. It would be easy to come up with a list of things we want to have, but we should only ask God for *essentials*. The catechism refers to this as "all things necessary for soul and body." Necessity is neither abundance nor scarcity, but exactly what we need. It is something God knows even better than we do ourselves.

The prophet Jonah felt it was a necessity for Nineveh to be completely destroyed. God did not. Jonah also felt that it was necessary for him to be shaded by a vine which had grown over his head. Again, God did not.

There are people who have prayed that God would bless their plans to immigrate. However, they returned to their homeland disappointed. People in the Middle Ages pleaded with God to bless the Crusades crying: "God wills it!" They too were wrong.

In asking for the necessities of life, therefore, we should be unassuming, always asking whether our request is good and pleasing in His sight. There is really only one prayer that we can pray without reservation: That is the Lord's Prayer, the perfect

prayer taught to us by Jesus.

Are Such Prayers Effective?

There are people who say that we should pray powerfully, storming the heavens with requests. They say we should pray for those who are sick in the firm belief that our prayers will heal them. If they do not get better, it reflects a lack of faith.

This is not true, though. The Bible gives us the example of Peter who was freed from prison through the prayers of other believers. But it also gives us James, beheaded for Christ, even though the church must have prayed fervently for him too (Acts. 12). We read of the miracles of healing in many places in the Bible, but we also hear of a man who was left sick by Paul in Miletus (II Tim. 4:20).

God knows what is best for us, and if we were left to our own desires, we would undoubtedly pray that we would not die.

Never forget that prayer is more than simply asking to receive something. Prayer is speaking with God, having communion with God. A child who speaks to his father surely does not always ask for things. It is a source of comfort and security for that child, just to be able to talk with his father. He can tell his father about his day, ask him or thank him for something. This is prayer.

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is the perfect prayer, though this does not mean that it is the only one we should ever pray. The Bible contains more prayers, particularly in the book of Psalms, and different circumstances require different words. But in the Lord's Prayer Jesus has given us an example which we can follow in all our prayers.

In the Sermon on the Mount, which contains the Lord's Prayer, Jesus mentions two things which we should remember during prayer. First of all, we should never use prayer to show off. We should never pray because we like the sound of our own voice and excellent vocabulary, hoping that people will be impressed. The fact that Jesus has to mention this at all is shameful, but there are people who live for such praise, people who are proud of their piety. Jesus advises us to pray privately, perhaps in our own room, where no one will see us. We should begin and end our day with prayer, kneeling before the Lord in the intimacy of our bedroom. In this way, every minute of the day and night is committed to His Fatherhand.

Secondly, we should not use too many words. A prayer does not improve simply because more words are used. A good prayer is a simple prayer; a prayer which humbly expresses what we feel in our hearts.

Ministers should also remember this. An overly long prayer is difficult for a congregation to follow and pray along with. The effectiveness of a prayer does not depend on length but on sincerity.

Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer which is brief, simple and pure. It begins with the *invocation*: "Our Father who art in heaven." Following that are three pleas *uplifting our hearts to God*. After these are three entreaties *directly related to our human needs*. The prayer is concluded with a *doxology extolling God's praise*. Finally, the word *Amen confirms the truth* of the entire prayer.

The Lord's Prayer contains everything that we may and should ask God. We may pray it each day.

For Adults

In the Old Testament, the Psalms contain many prayers, but there are also special prayers in the other books. Abraham's prayer for Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33); Moses' prayer for Israel (Ex. 32:11-14, 31-32); David's thanksgiving prayer for the Lord's favors (II Sam. 7:18-29); Solomon's prayer for wisdom (I Kings 3:4-15) and his prayer for the dedication of the temple (I Kings 8:12-53); the prayers of the prophets (Isa. 63:7-64; Jer. 32:16-25; Dan. 9:4-19; Hab. 3).

Often Jesus spent the entire night in prayer (Luke 6:12-13); and John 17 contains His high priestly prayer for His people.

Although no particular prayer *posture* is indicated as mandatory, kneeling is often mentioned (Ex. 9:5; Dan. 6:11; Acts 7:60, 9:40, 20:36, 21:5; Eph. 3:14; Phil. 2:10). It is a sad thing that kneeling benches were left out of churches following the Reformation. Feelings on the practice of kneeling before the Host present in the Mass, were strong.

In the Roman Catholic church, the Lord's Prayer (Pater Noster) is often prayed with the rosary. The rosary is a string of large and small beads, so that people can count the number of Ave Marias or Pater Nosters they have prayed. If you pray a rosary full of either one of these prayers, it is considered a good work.

Luther called the Lord's Prayer "the greatest martyr on earth," because it is often prayed thoughtlessly and, consequently, is badly abused. According to the Roman Catholics, the Ave Maria (Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us, poor sinners, now and in the hour of our death) was re-

vealed by Mary herself in the year 1206.

In 1883, Pope Leo III set aside the month of October for special emphasis on the rosary to counteract the harmful effects of Reformation Day (October 31). 1983 marked five hundred years since Luther's birth.

On the Textbook

1. What is another way of asking question 116?
2. Why was Daniel successful, according to the book?
3. Why did Daniel's fellow administrators dislike him so much?
4. What was their plan?
5. How did Daniel respond?
6. What is the "honest admission" we make when we pray?
7. What two gifts does God give to those who pray?
8. Why is the prayer of heathens not real prayer?
9. Why must we humble ourselves when we pray?
10. How do we know that God will hear our prayer?
11. What should we ask for in prayer?
12. What must we always ask ourselves about the requests we make in prayer?
13. What else besides asking for things is included in our prayer?
14. Name the two things Jesus warned against in the Sermon on the Mount. What did He advise us to do?

On the Bible

1. Read Matthew 6:5-15 and Luke 11:1-12. Are there any differences between these two versions of the Lord's Prayer? List them. Is there any difference between what we know as the Lord's Prayer and what you find in these passages? What are they? Describe the different situations in which Jesus gave this instruction, first the situation in Matthew 6, and then in Luke 11. Is the Lord's Prayer the only prayer we ought to pray? How ought we to use it? What can you learn about all of your prayers from this one prayer?

2. Read Ephesians 6:10-20. To what does Paul compare the Christian life? What are the weapons he mentions? Who are your enemies, according to Paul? What does he mean by that? What is Paul's final piece of "battle advice"? Is it last because it is least important? When ought we to pray, and how? What does "in the Spirit" mean? Looking at the causes and concerns for which Paul requests prayer, what kinds of things ought we to pray about?

For Discussion

1. "Don't Reformed people believe in providence and predestination? (Check Lord's Days 9 and 10). They believe that God is in total control. Every day and every moment of my life has already been planned. So why bother to pray?" What do you think?
2. "Today I want to introduce to the congregation our prayer cause for this month. We are asking the congregation to pray for mission work in Sierra Leone. This is what we need to do in order to pray successfully: I estimate that there are about 600 people here. If each of us will pray for two minutes per day about Sierra Leone, God will be receiving 1200 minutes, or twenty hours of prayer about this cause every day. He's got to hear that, and He's sure to bless our work." How would you respond to this person? Do you agree? Or is he wrong? Explain why you would agree or disagree with him.

Lord's Day XLVI

Illustration: It is customary to address someone by name when you meet. Sometimes, however, it is difficult to know just how to address a person. Suppose you were to meet the queen. What would you say? Madam? Your majesty? Dear queen? You would be well advised to find out beforehand!

When you talk to God, it is also good to know how to address Him. Jesus Himself taught us the following beautiful words: "Our Father, who art in heaven." It is amazing that this is permissible when you consider who God is.

People have had strange ideas about God. Over the years He has been pictured as a friendly neighbor, put in various stage productions and painted as a venerable greybeard, all of which are gross insults to His majesty.

People have always tried to make images of God, prostrating themselves before these as though they were God. The prophet Isaiah scornfully denounced such vain practices. He ironically spoke of skilled craftsmen, goldsmiths or carpenters, who fashioned images you could place anywhere. In anger Isaiah exclaims: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?" (Isa. 40:21 NIV). He was aghast and dismayed that people could be so extremely foolish. The might of God, the power of the Creator of heaven and earth pours from his lips: "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?" (Isa. 40:12 NIV). There is nothing that God has not created from the highest mountains to the deepest oceans—they were all His handiwork, brought into being by a mere gesture.

Mankind is far beneath Him, and cannot be compared to God: "Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; before Him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by Him as worthless and less than nothing (Isa. 40:15a and 17 NIV).

Isaiah also proclaimed God's power in world

government. "He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of the world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than He blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff" (Isa. 40:22-24 NIV).

Men are conceited. Napoleon thought he could conquer the world. Hitler claimed that his empire would last a thousand years. Yet God stretched out His hand and they were gone—blown over and withered. God is incredibly powerful and we can fully understand why Abraham referred to himself as "dust" and "ashes" during prayer. It is when we recognize God's greatness, that He draws near to us. Isaiah, after he extolled God's majesty, continued to comfort Israel, the people of God, with these words: "Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?' He gives strength to the weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:27, 29-31 NIV).

**Infinitely High
and Yet
Near By**

Isaiah teaches us two things and we find these two beautifully interwoven in Psalm 138:

Jehovah looketh from on high
With kindly eye upon the lowly.

Jesus teaches us to grasp both these concepts in the words of the Lord's Prayer—"Our Father" referring to God's nearness, and "who art in heaven," referring to His majesty.

Our Father How can the great, Almighty God possibly be our Father? When you think about it, you come face to face with two miracles. The first is the miracle of Adam in Paradise. Adam was God's son, which, although it may sound strange, is clearly written in Luke 3. The genealogy of the Lord Jesus ends in this way: ". . . the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (vs. 38 NIV). Thus Adam was allowed to call God "Father," for he had been created in God's image. He bore a human resemblance to God, in that he was given knowledge, righteousness and holiness, and God loved Adam. This is the first miracle.

The second miracle lies in the fact that God still loves man even after the fall into sin. John 3:16 reads: "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" (NIV).

God's love as a Father for sinners is seen beautifully in the parable of the prodigal son. Although the father sorrowed greatly because of his son, he anxiously waited for his return, opening his home and heart to him. Jesus introduces us to the great, Almighty God and teaches us to pray "Our Father."

Is God the Father of All People?

When we say: "Our Father," does this mean that God is everyone's Father? No, Jesus did not mean that, for He always distinguished between believers and unbelievers. Think back to John 3:16: "That *whoever believes in Him* shall not perish but have eternal life" (NIV). Jesus distinguished between the people whom the Father has given Him and those who had not been given Him. John 17:6 reads: "I have revealed You to those whom You gave me out of the world. They were Yours; You gave them to Me and they have obeyed Your word" (NIV). We can conclude that there is a chosen people of God on earth who may call Him "Father." They are those people who believe in His one and only Son, Jesus Christ. Included are their children, who may also pray:

Father we adore Thee
Lay our love before Thee
How we love Thee!

"Who Art in Heaven"

Jesus tells us that the Father is in heaven. We could compare this to a king, living in a

palace far removed from earth. But if we do, we should remember Solomon's prayer: "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You" (I Kings 8:27 NIV).

Heaven was also created by God: in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The Creator always remains greater than creation. Heaven is His throne. That is to say, it is the place where He reveals His majesty most beautifully. We can only see and understand a little of His power here on earth. We look "through a glass darkly."

Moses once asked to be allowed to see God's glory. He had a great longing to know God as fully as possible. While he stood in a cleft in a rock, God covered him with His hand and passed by him. When He had passed by He removed His hand, allowing Moses to see His back. This story, told in a way that we can understand, shows that Moses was permitted to see only as much of God as he could absorb. And even that was so magnificent that Moses exclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6 NIV). When Moses returned from Mount Sinai to the people of Israel, his face was so radiant that it seemed to them that they were looking at the sun. They were afraid and Moses put a veil in front of his face when he spoke to them.

One day we will see God "face to face." That day will come when we, for Jesus' sake, will go to heaven. We are not there yet, however, and we must always realize this when we pray to our heavenly Father. Our speech must always be filled with awe. Our folded hands have ceased being busy; our closed eyes shut out everything around us; and our hearts and minds bow in awe before our great and Almighty God. It is good to remember the words of the hymn:

God Himself is with us;
Let us now adore Him,
And with awe appear before Him.

The catechism continues on: We "may expect from His almighty power all things necessary for body and soul." For if that great God is also our Father, He can give us everything we need. No one is stronger or mightier than God. When God is for us, nothing and no one can be against us.

For Adults

When Jesus talks about prayer, He also recommends privacy. Most houses today do not have an inner chamber such as was found in His time. But when we rise or

retire, we can make time available, secluded in our bedrooms, between ourselves and God. It pleases Him to see us kneel in front of our bed, to speak with Him. Under certain circumstances, when there are many people around, it may be difficult to find this privacy. Perhaps, on occasion, it is better to wait until you are in bed to avoid scoffing or roughhousing.

Roman Catholic churches are nearly always open and people can always make use of them to pray. They believe that their churches were built on sacred soil. We believe, however, that any place where the Father is worshiped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), God meets with His people. Nevertheless, since it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a quiet place to sit down for a while in our busy world, it would not be a bad idea if our churches were available during the week for those who needed them.

On the Textbook

1. What are some of the pictures of God that people have?
2. How did Isaiah try to express the power and majesty of God?
3. What is the value of the human race in comparison with God?
4. Who are the two men mentioned in the book in connection with man's conceit?
5. What does God do when we recognize His greatness?
6. How does the Lord's Prayer reflect both the majesty of God, and yet the nearness of God?
7. Who was Adam's father? Why is He called Adam's Father?
8. Why may we again call God "our Father"?
9. Are there any people who may not speak of God as their Father?
10. Can we see God's glory? Will we ever be able to?
11. What may God's children expect from our almighty, majestic Father?

On the Bible

1. Read Job 40-42. How does God reveal Himself here? What is the impression of God that you get from this passage? How does God demonstrate His power and majesty? To what does God direct Job's thoughts? (Check Psalm 8 and 19.) Is He a frightening God, too high and powerful for sinners like us? Is there anything in these chapters that reflects God's Fatherly love and care? Can believers be comforted when they recognize God as the Almighty One? How can they be comforted?
2. Read Romans 8:12-17. To what do we *not* have an obligation? What is the result of living "according to the sinful nature"? How can we "put to death the misdeeds of the body"? What does Paul call those "who are led by the Spirit of God"? What kind of Spirit have we received? What kind of spirit have we *not* received? Why might we fear God? Why shouldn't we fear Him? Who is it that makes you sure that you are a child of God, when you are afraid of God because of your sin? If you are God's child, what else does that make you? What do we inherit? Who gave us His Spirit? Are we natural or adopted children of God? Does that make any difference as to how He will treat us?

For Discussion

1. "We don't have to call God 'Father.' We could just as well say 'Mother.'" Is this true? Does it make any difference what name you give to God? Are we the ones who give God names? Why does God take the names that He does? What if a person has a father who abandoned him, or a father who abused her?
2. Look at Matthew 6:25-34. Is worry really unbelief? Does Jesus want people to quit working and depend on God? Haven't Christians ever starved to death, or frozen to death, or died of thirst? Is Jesus telling us the truth, then? Didn't God break the promise He makes in this passage?

Lord's Day XLVII

Illustration: The first thing Jesus teaches us to ask God is not for ourselves but for Him. "Hallowed be Thy name." Our conversations generally begin with the almighty "I." We tend to think of ourselves first, our goals, achievements, salaries or enjoyment. Jesus wants to teach us that we were created to serve and love God.

It is good to know that *if* we really do this, we will be totally content. Conversely, if we do not, our lives will remain restless, never at peace.

What did Jesus mean when He said: "Hallowed be Thy name"? Why must God's *name* be hallowed? To understand this fully we should go back to the story of Moses and the burning bush. At this time in Moses' life he had already been separated from God's people in Egypt for forty years. He was eighty years old, an old man, and probably convinced that he would end his days in the peaceful solitude of shepherding. If this had indeed been the case, what purpose would his life have had?

Possibly Moses himself considered it a failure. When he was young he had imagined himself as someone who would be useful to God's people and God's name. But his ideals had gone up in smoke. He had killed a man and fled. It seemed as if his life had lost direction. Then, after all these years, God appeared to Moses. He was guiding his sheep along the foot of Mount Horeb and came upon a strange phenomenon. He saw a bush that, although it was on fire, did not burn up. His curiosity was whetted and he slowly approached the bush until he suddenly heard a voice that pierced his very soul. "Moses, Moses!" God had called to him from within the bush. Awe-struck, Moses removed his sandals and covered his face, for he knew that God was holy and he was not.

At this point, God revealed to him the purpose of his life. All these years in the desert had led up to this very moment. It would be his task to lead God's people out of the land of Egypt. But Moses, impetuous and full of fire in his youth, now lacked the courage. His objections bubbled forth and he said to God: "Supposed I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,'

and they ask me, 'What is His name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Ex. 3:13 NIV).

Moses wanted to know God's name. Why? Did he not know that he was speaking with God for whom he was in awe? Yes, he did, but he also wanted to *know* who God was, for the Israelites would have to be told exactly whom they were dealing with. God was not visible to the human eye and no one was able to say: "This is what God looks like." God is strong, great and almighty, but exactly what was His relationship to His people—a people who had been oppressed for four hundred years now. Was He still allied with them, or had He, in His far-off heaven, forgotten their plight? Who was He?

God then revealed His name—the name that His people could call Him. That name was "I am who I am." It was a strange name—actually somewhat of a riddle. Yet it is a wonderful name, because it means that although things constantly change in the world, God will remain the same. He will always remain the same God for His people, always faithful to them.

In the Old Testament, the name "I am who I am," is embodied in the word "Lord," a name which says that God will always be true to the covenant He has made with His people. God stresses this fact to Moses in the following words: "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the Lord of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation" (Ex. 3:15 NIV).

God *always* wants to remain "Lord," a God whose faithfulness to His people remains steadfast. The Israelites may never doubt that and when they pray they are always to address Him as Lord.

The same is true for the church today. This is why, in the first petition, Jesus teaches us to pray: "Hallowed be Thy name." He shows us the same way which His heavenly Father showed Moses.

Rightly to Know Him

We can now understand why the catechism directly explains the first petition by saying: "Grant us, first, rightly to know Thee."

We could also have mistaken thoughts about God. After four hundred years in Egypt, the people of Israel were tempted to think, "God has forgotten us." There are times when we might be tempted to have similar thoughts: "God lives so far away that He could not possibly know about me." Therefore, it is most important to know who God is. He is the Lord. This means that today also He still remains true to the covenant He has made with His people. It means that He thinks of all His children, even the smallest babe in arms. Jesus addressed Him as Father at the beginning of the prayer—"Our Father, who art in heaven." This Father is a real father who has genuine love for all His children. He loved them so much that He gave His only begotten Son to die for them on the cross. This is how we may know God and we should continually pray that we may know Him more intimately.

Praising God

The catechism continues to teach us to sanctify, glorify and praise God in all His works. In the Old Testament, sanctification actually meant a setting apart. We can set God's name apart by respecting it and using it in the proper way, so that anyone who hears us use it will know that this name is indeed separate and distinct, exalted far above any other name. If we do this, we will automatically praise God's name, testifying how wonderful it is and how much it means to us. But then we should know what the name stands for.

The catechism tells us that the meaning of God's name includes several things.

God's name speaks of His *omnipotence* or power. We see the whole world as God's creation, confessing that our Father has made that world.

The name also refers to God's *wisdom*. We can see the skill that has gone into the making of a bird as it warbles on a tree branch. We are awed by the splendor of the stars each night. We marvel at the ingenious way our teeth are arranged, enabling us to eat. We sense the complex structure of our eyes and ears—we see and we hear. And we acknowledge that our Father is wise.

The catechism mentions God's *goodness*. His goodness encompasses all people for He causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

God's name includes *justice*. Sin is punished by Him. He said that the earth would bring forth

thorns and thistles, and that Word is still being fulfilled. In His supreme justice God punished sin through our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. And we may say that our Father in heaven is just.

The catechism mentions God's *mercy*. His mercy is a continual experience—we know that, despite all our sins, He accepts us as His children. We know that He has made Jesus to become sin for our sake and that He has promised us eternal life. And we may sing—"Morning by morning new mercies I see."

Last of all, the catechism mentions *truth*. We read the Bible. We listen to the prophecies which God has fulfilled and continues to fulfill. And we confess that God's Word will always be fulfilled.

This is how we must praise the name of our heavenly Father. We don't do this all the time. We are not always aware of God's presence, nor do we try to feel it. Our attention does not focus on God half enough. But our Lord Jesus teaches us to ask for more awareness and if we do ask, God will answer that prayer.

Our Lives

Praising God with our mouth is not enough. It would be like the boy who always said that he had really nice parents, but never obeyed them. That boy would be a little windbag. And if we bear only verbal lip-praise to our Father in heaven, but do not obey Him, then we, like the boy, are windbags. People will comment that our faith is worthless, perhaps continuing to say that the God of such a faith can't be worth much either. In this way, it is possible for us to blaspheme God's name by the way we live. This is the worst thing imaginable. It was horrible when David stole someone else's wife and killed her husband. Many people must have had second thoughts about this man "after God's own heart."

If we are to sanctify God's name, we will have to do so in our daily lives. This puts limits on the way we live. We must order and direct our whole lives, says the catechism. Order and direct—like setting an arrow on a bow and aiming. The arrow is not shot until it is carefully placed in the center of the bow. Then as you aim carefully, keeping your eye on the target, you let go.

This is how you live when you love your Father in heaven. You constantly remember that He is always faithful to you, and you direct your life in such a way that your eye is always on Him, faithfulness to Him your goal.

How can we achieve this? How do we live at home, at school, on the street or in the church, so that God will be pleased with our lives. It is a way of

life that first of all requires prayer. Because the Bible tells us that the Spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak, we need God's help in this. We must pray to be kept from evil, and for strength to do good. God will hear that prayer, and will allow us, albeit in a small way, to sanctify His name in our lives.

For Adults The Bible has many names for God. Not one of them adequately describes who He is, because He is greater than all the intelligence and words we possess. Nevertheless, people have tried to arrange these names into categories, speaking of *personal* names, *actual* names, and *attributes*.

Some of God's personal names are: El or Elohim, that is God (the powerful one); El Shaddai, that is, God the omnipotent; Adonai, that is Lord (commander); Yahweh or Jehovah, that is, Lord; Yahweh Sabbaoth, that is, Lord of Hosts. In the New Testament we also find Theos, that is God; Kyrios, that is Lord, referring especially to the name of the exalted Christ; Pater, that is, Father.

The actual names are Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Attributes refer to God's virtues: the Eternal One, the Unchangeable One, the Omnipresent One, the Wise One, the Powerful One, the Holy One, the Righteous One, the Merciful One.

On the Textbook

1. Why does Jesus open His prayer with "Hallowed be Thy name"?
2. Find out what "hallow" means.
3. What had Moses been doing before the Lord spoke to him?
4. Why did Moses take off his sandals and cover his face?
5. What is so important about God's name? What did it tell Moses and Israel about God?
6. Why would Israel be comforted when they heard God's name and its meaning?
7. How does the catechism begin its explanation of the first petition?
8. Why does it begin that way?
9. What does it mean to "sanctify" God's name?
10. List the "several things" included in the meaning of God's name.

11. Give your own explanations of each.
12. Explain how we can be, and often are, "windbags."
13. How can you hallow God's name in your life? Think about the things you do each day and night.

On the Bible

1. Look up the following passages: Genesis 2:4; Genesis 6:4; 14:19; 17:1; 18:27; 21:33; Exodus 3:14; 1 Samuel 1:3. List the different names of God revealed in these various passages. Why does God give us more than one name for Himself? What can you learn about God from each of these names?
2. Read Ezekiel 20:1-44. What is repeated in this passage, especially in the first 26 verses? Who becomes the object of ridicule when Israel is disobedient? Who do you think becomes the object of ridicule when the church is disobedient, or when a Christian lives a sinful lifestyle? Whose name is at stake? What would have happened, what will happen if God's people are obedient? Does this tell you anything about why God chose Israel? Is it significant that the Name of the Lord is used many times in this passage? What might the Lord be trying to say to Israel? Which name appears most often? Look at the first line of answer 122. Now reread verses 12, 20, 26, 38, 42, 44. Do you see any connection between God's name, and learning to "rightly know" Him? What reason is given in verse 44 for God's choosing Israel, the church, and you?

For Discussion

1. We are known in the world as people who belong to God. Do you bring glory to His name? Do you cause His name to be ridiculed? Does the church? How do you, personally, and how does the church as a whole, bring dishonor to God's name? What can we do about that?
2. "We're just teenagers. We have to have some fun. A little partying, some drinking, some wild oats. But we haven't made profession of faith or anything. We'll straighten out when we do." Do you really consider the glory of God's name, God's reputation when you plan your parties, go out on dates, choose your entertainment?

Lord's Day XLVIII

Illustration: A Mission Story

The second petition of the perfect prayer Christ has taught us is "Thy Kingdom come."

The meaning of this petition is illustrated clearly by the following mission chronicle. It concerns the life of one man used by God to convert a tribe of cannibals into Christians in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Batak tribe, as they were known, lived on the island of Sumatra, part of the Indonesian Archipelago. They lived in a virtually impenetrable jungle sheltered by mountainous peaks and ridges. When, in 1834, two young American missionaries, Lyman and Munson, managed to penetrate into their territory to proclaim the gospel, they were killed and eaten by the natives. In that same year, however, a seemingly unrelated event took place on a small island off the German coast. A baby boy was born who would later avenge the blood of these martyrs, not by spilling more blood, but by teaching these natives to kneel before the King whom the missionaries had represented.

The boy's name was Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen. His parents were poor, and absolutely no one could have foreseen that he would become the uncrowned king of Sumatra.

At the age of thirteen, Ludwig had an accident: a cart rode over him and both his legs were bruised badly. While convalescing, he read the following passage in the Bible: "Whatever you ask in my name, I will give it." He asked his mother whether God would be able to heal him and she assured him that everything the Bible said was true. Ludwig then prayed for healing, at the same time promising God that he would become a missionary if God would answer that prayer.

He soon recovered, but it wasn't until he was twenty-three that he could start fulfilling his promise to God. His father had died and Ludwig had the responsibility of looking after his mother and sisters. In 1857, however, he attended the missionary school in Barmen and in 1861 he was sent to Indonesia.

He had heard about the Batak tribe and wanted to do his missionary work among them. However,

the Dutch government (Indonesia was a colony of The Netherlands at this time) refused him access to this area because of the dangers involved. Nevertheless, bypassing the official route, he went anyway and established his base in the valley of Silindung, the home of the cannibals.

His reception was not encouraging. "We'll hack off your legs and throw you in the river!" the natives shouted at him when they saw him building his cabin. But, unperturbed, Nommensen continued to build, for he knew he was in God's hand.

In an effort to kill him, the natives cut the bamboo thongs that held his house together. However, suddenly there was an earthquake and as Nommensen walked outside, the cabin collapsed behind him. He was unharmed.

Another time, someone tried to poison him. Although he was unaware of this at the time, a member of his own church later told him this story: "When you first came to live in Silindung, many people talked about you. I believed that you would make our tribe unhappy because I thought that you would force us to do hard labor. I waited a long time to see whether anyone would kill you. Finally, I decided to do it myself. I made my way into your cabin and secretly put some poison into your food. Then I waited for you to die. No one can survive that poison, but you lived. I concluded that your God had protected you, and that He must, therefore, be a very powerful God. This made me think. Now I've become a Christian, but I won't have any peace until I've asked your forgiveness."

Nommensen's undaunted and childlike faith gradually filled the native population with deep respect for him and for his God.

On another occasion, Nommensen journeyed to Lake Toba, a sacred lake which was off-limits to white people. He knew that the punishment for violating the sacred ground was death, but he returned safely nevertheless. He also healed the sick and preached the gospel everywhere. What a joyous occasion it must have been when in 1867 he baptized the first converts: four men, their wives and five children. That was the beginning of a tremendous harvest for the Kingdom of God in the

Batak tribe.

Nommensen received assistants and in time thousands of Batak people accepted Christ. Both Nommensen's courage as well as the deplorable conditions in these heathen areas is illustrated by the following story.

One day a messenger sped into the mission compound in Lagoboti. He told Nommensen that in the remote region of Parsambilan, belonging to the province of Sigumpar, members of a Uluan tribe had abducted a young girl. Nommensen lost no time and, saddling his horse, immediately journeyed East, leaving the messenger far behind. He raced to Parsambilan, determined the proper bearing, and continued, instructing a couple of rajahs to follow him. A full day had passed since the abduction, but the tracks were still fresh. Nommensen raced his horse to the limit to gain time.

He caught up with the party in a clearing in the middle of the jungle. Screaming loudly, they had strapped the girl to a sacrificial pole. In a flash Nommensen jumped off his horse, striding towards them. Intimidated by his sudden appearance they all took flight. Now there was only the blood-spattered victim tied to the pole. She had been out in the open sun all day. Her ears had been cut off and rivulets of blood ran down the sides of her neck. Just before taking flight, one of the abductors had still managed to gouge a piece of flesh from her cheek. Flies buzzed and swarmed around the open wound and open lash marks on her bare back were swollen from the poison that had been rubbed into them. Her hair had been shaved off, hair being a prime ingredient in a variety of magic potions.

Nommensen quickly cut through the thongs. The girl was now free, but collapsed into his arms. Nommensen's rajahs led her away as the members of the abducting Uluan tribe returned to the clearing, this time accompanied by their own rajahs. Nommensen now found himself in the position of mediator. As the incident was not entirely the fault of the Uluan tribe, a ransom was arranged. The area in question was still primitive and not dependent on colonial government. Nommensen himself paid for the girl's ransom and was allowed to leave in peace.

Blessed at seeing the fruits of his missionary work, Nommensen died at the age of eighty-five with these words on his lips: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." At least forty thousand people attended his funeral. For four hours Batak Christians filed past his coffin.

In the 1950's the Silindung Valley counted approximately ninety thousand Christians (90%), and the entire Batak territory held roughly four hundred thousand Christians.

The Kingdom of God

This then, is how the kingdom of God came to the people of Batak. It started the same way in Sumba and Java, both Indonesian Islands. It also grew this way on the islands of the Pacific Ocean, among the Papuas in New Guinea and throughout the whole world.

What exactly is this kingdom of God? It does not only mean that God rules over everything, because He also rules the devil who has no place in that kingdom. Rather, the kingdom of God means that God rules over people *who serve Him*. Whenever people serve Him the kingdom of His *grace* has come. Through His grace people are liberated from the power of the devil, whom the Bible sometimes calls the ruler of this world.

Only the Lord Jesus can bring such liberation. That is why, wherever Jesus appears, the Bible repeatedly says: "The Kingdom of Heaven is near." The power of Jesus, the power that changes people into subjects of God, must be revealed all around the world. This is why Jesus teaches us to pray: "Thy Kingdom come."

Where Does the Kingdom Begin?

The kingdom of God begins in our hearts. Mere formal worship does not make someone a part of that kingdom. Going to church, attending Christian school, sitting through catechism classes, or doing all those supposedly Christian things, is not enough. The King wants our hearts—He wants our entire being.

This is why the catechism explains the first petition as follows: "So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that we may submit ourselves more and more to Thee." What other people do, therefore, should not be our guideline—we must do what God commands us in His Word. Through the Holy Spirit, God's Word directs our lives in such a way that we will serve God.

Our service here on earth is really only a very small beginning. If you think of how people in heaven constantly serve God, how they continually praise Him with all their being, then it is clear that we can only accomplish a fraction of what they do. But even that fraction can amount to a great deal, if you think of a man like Nommensen.

What Do Citizens of the Kingdom Do?

The kingdom of God cannot remain hidden in the hearts of Christians. Since Christians love the one Word of God and are

led by the one Spirit of God, they form a unity. That unity is known as the church. Thus, wherever you find the kingdom of God, you will find the church.

After Nommensen had preached the gospel to the Batak people, a church appeared, people were baptized and they all assembled on Sunday to hear the Word of God.

To pray for the coming of God's kingdom is to pray for the church. The catechism puts it this way: "Preserve and increase Thy church." Preservation of the church means that all church members remain loyal to the King, proving that in their lives. The increase of the church refers to its growth; to the addition of more members from every part of the world. A prayer for increase is a prayer for mission work and evangelization, that throughout the entire world people will come to know and serve God.

Who Is the Kingdom's Great Enemy?

The kingdom of God moves ever onward and cannot be halted. Despite this fact, the devil tries as hard as he can to stop it. A good illustration of this is Jesus' parable about the farmer seeding his field. That very night his enemy sowed weeds among his good seeds. To secretly destroy someone else's work is contemptible and underhanded, but that is how the devil operates. He repeatedly tries to destroy God's beautiful creation. Because the devil is very strong, much stronger than man, the only weapon that can effectively be used against him is that of prayer. That is why the catechism further explains this petition with: "Destroy the works of the devil, every power that exalts itself against Thee, and all wicked councils conceived against Thy holy Word."

The works of the devil were evident when Pharaoh ordered the drowning of all male Hebrew babies. In his own devious way, the devil tried to prevent the coming of God's kingdom. The works of the devil were also evident when King Herod ordered the murder of the infants in Bethlehem, for it was through Herod that he wanted to destroy the holy Child.

The works of the devil are still evident. There are, and always have been, Christians who, when persecuted or tempted, are no longer faithful to God, but follow their own desires. There are many things you can do in your life—earn money, do exciting things, have fun, or live a life of leisure. But if you fail to serve God in what you do, you will find yourself outside of His kingdom, subject to the rule of the devil.

The devil is particularly fond of robbing God's

Word of its power. He likes nothing better than to have people doubt God's Word, or scoff at it; he exalts in the fact that many people think they're a step ahead of the Bible, believing it to be outdated.

If you doubt God's Word, however, you cannot proclaim the message of God's kingdom with conviction. Our constant prayer should be respect for that Word. If we have that, we will be able to seriously discuss it with other people and God's kingdom will come.

When Will the Second Petition be Answered?

The perfection of God's kingdom is coming closer. No one knows when this will be, but it will be suddenly. When the end comes, Jesus will turn the kingdom over to God the Father so that God may be all in all (I Cor. 15:24 and 28). This means that at that time Jesus will make all those people whom God has given Him, perfect subjects in the kingdom of God. He will present them to the Father who will let them enter His eternal kingdom. This is the renewal of the Paradise He once created and they will live in that kingdom as joyful children of God. It is wonderful to be able to look forward to the perfection of God's kingdom.

When we know this we can begin to understand the last words of the Bible: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20 NIV).

By the sea of crystal, Saints in glory stand,
Myriads in number, Drawn from every land.
Robed in white apparel, Washed in Jesus
blood,
They now reign in heaven, With the Lamb
of God.

Out of tribulation, Death and Satan's hand,
They have been translated, At the Lord's
command.

In their hands they're holding Palms of
victory;
Hark! The jubilant chorus Shouts
triumphantly:

"Unto God Almighty, Sitting on the throne,
And the Lamb, victorious, Be the praise
alone.

God has wrought salvation, He did
wondrous things;
Who shall not extol Thee, Holy King of
Kings?"

For Adults

Abraham Kuyper once said:
"There is not an inch of our

lives of which Christ, Sovereign of all, does not say: 'It is Mine!' "

Kuyper wrote a book by the title of *Pro Rege*, which literally means "For the King." He was a church father in the second half of the nineteenth century who tried to make Christians aware of the fact that Christ is King of kings. It was Christ who said: "To Me is given all power in heaven and on earth." His kingship must be confessed in the church, for it is in the church that we recognize the lordship of Jesus Christ who reigns through His Word and power and who has appointed office bearers to act in His name. But His kingship must also be confessed "in all areas of life," that is, wherever Christians live and work.

Human life in all its complexity, however, presents many problems for which Christians have not found solutions. That is why it is necessary for Christians to think about these problems together so that answers can be found. In other words, it is necessary for them to form communities and organizations so that they may pray and work together.

In the field of higher education, Dutch Christians banded together and established the Free University. In politics, they established Christian political parties; in the social field, labor unions and employer organizations were formed; and basically all Christian schools were begun by communities who confessed the kingship of Christ.

More recently people have begun to object to these Christian organizations, the objections mainly coming from the followers of Karl Barth. Karl Barth taught that all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, are under God's judgment but also share in the grace of Jesus Christ.

This train of thought promotes cooperation with anyone and is called "solidarity." There is no room in this solidarity for separate Christian organizations, since they are splinter movements that threaten the unity and solidarity of mankind as a whole. Many Christians, opposed to Christian organizations, argue that we must reach out to others and break through the barriers that have separated Christians and non-Christians for so long. These people defend membership in non-Christian, so-called neutral organizations, many of which are self-confessedly secular. These people argue that Christians should become members of socialist political parties and secular labor unions to fill their task as the salt of the earth.

The biblical objection to the solidarity idea can be found in II Corinthians 6:14 where Paul writes: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (NIV). We do, though, have to work together with unbelievers, in business, politics, and other areas of

life. We cannot simply get up and leave this world (I Cor. 5:10). Jesus Himself prayed: "My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15 NIV).

But when we face the issue of cooperating in the many fields and relationships of life, we are repeatedly confronted with the difference between total obedience to God and total disregard for Him; the difference of obedience to the authority of God's Word and denial of that Word. This difference is especially clear in the schools. Children cannot be raised in the way the Lord demands in His covenant in a school which does not subject all of learning to the Word of God.

Of equal importance is obedience to the Word of God in government and social order. Only the Word of God discloses the principles that govern all of life. Only that Word calls attention to sin in all of man's thinking and doing, and to the grace through which the power of sin can be broken. To stand shoulder to shoulder with unbelievers in these major areas of life is *not a good solidarity*. It would be better if Christians formed a solidarity, asking others to join them on the way to God's kingdom.

On the Textbook

1. What happened to the first missionaries among the Batak tribe?
2. Why did Ludwig Nommensen become a missionary?
3. What were some of the obstacles he faced in trying to reach the Batak people?
4. What incident illustrates Nommensen's courage, as well as the deplorable conditions among the heathen?
5. How many Christians could be found in the Silindang Valley in the 1950's? In the whole Batak territory?
6. What is meant by "the kingdom of God"? Where does it begin?
7. How do we want God to rule us, according to the catechism?
8. Explain your answer to number 7.
9. What relationship is there between the church and the kingdom?
10. What do "preserve" and "increase" refer to? (These words are found in answer 123 of the catechism.)

11. What are some signs of the devil's work against the kingdom of God?
12. What is the devil particularly fond of? How does he carry that out?
13. Who will establish the kingdom, and fulfill this petition? When?

On the Bible

1. Read Matthew 4:23-25. What did Jesus do as He went through Galilee? What is meant by "the good news of the kingdom"? Check the following passages to help you understand what Jesus meant by "the kingdom of God": Matthew 5:3-10; 5:19-20; 6:19-21; 6:33; 7:21-23; 12:25-28; 13:44-46; 13:52; 18:2-5, 7-9; 21:28-32; 25:13; and 25:31-46. Write down in a few words what each of these tells you about the kingdom.

For Discussion

1. What does answer 123 want to get across to us when it combines "Word and Spirit"? How do you come under the rule of the Word and the Spirit? What does it mean that God uses these two instruments to rule us? How does your life reflect the fact that God rules it, or the prayer that He will rule it?
2. "The kingdom of God is started and ends in people's hearts. This world will never change until Jesus comes back. As long as I know God rules in my own heart, that's enough for me." Does this agree with what the catechism says about the kingdom? Why do you think the catechism moves from "us," to "the church," to "every force" and "every conspiracy"? Can we, on the other hand, help to bring in the kingdom if God is not the Ruler of our hearts? Describe for the class your idea about the coming of the kingdom, and how you can be a part of it.

Lord's Day XLIX

Illustration: To do what someone else wants us to do is not easy. We would much rather do what we want to do. Simple obedience, generally speaking, is difficult.

Adam and Eve did what they wanted, not what God wanted when they ate fruit from the forbidden tree. The Israelites did what they wanted when they bowed down to idols. Saul did what he wanted when he persecuted the early church.

People generally like to do what they want, even when they know it is wrong. This is called being *self-willed*.

In the third petition of the Lord's Prayer, the Lord Jesus teaches us to ask God to give us the strength to do what He wants us to do. "Thy will be done, as in heaven so on earth."

We may tend to think it is easy to obey God. If God said something to us personally, if we heard His voice, we would most certainly do it. But would we? God does not always ask us to do simple things. Remember the rich young ruler. He was asked to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor. Jesus personally told him to do so. Even so, he was unable to do it. He was very rich and did not dare follow Jesus into poverty.

On the other hand, there was Abram, who did exactly what God asked him to do, and it was certainly not easy. To leave your country, your family and your father's house was heartbreaking. There was no postal service, no familiar face welcoming him and he would not return. He knew beforehand that he would never see his relatives again. The world was a large place, danger lurking around every corner. He had to be on guard constantly for his possessions and wife. When he left his homeland, Abram abandoned every form of security that he knew, and he had no idea where he was going. He did this all simply because a voice had told him to.

Believing God, he obeyed. But that initial obedience did not mean that his life was without problems. Fleeing a famine, he arrived in Egypt where his wife was taken from him. When he returned to Canaan his servants quarrelled with the servants of the only relative that had accompanied

him. The thought must have occurred to him that he had been wrong to leave his country. He may even have thought that returning would solve many things.

But Abram remained obedient to God's voice. He reasoned that if he had been asked to leave his father's household, this included his nephew.

Abram did not follow his own will, which would have included gain and self-interest. He could have said: "Lot, you'd better go back. I'm older, and it's up to you to go and find your own place." But Abram was confident that God would always provide for him and he allowed Lot first choice. "Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left" (Gen. 13:9 NIV). Lot chose the best. It was a selfish choice. It was a choice made without faith and without prayer, and he suffered the consequences of that choice later. The plain of the Jordan "well-water, like the garden of the Lord" (vs. 10) would be destroyed.

Abram remained behind, alone with God, and God said to him: "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever" (Gen. 13:14 and 15 NIV).

Abram had obeyed God's command. Psalm 19:11b says: ". . . in keeping them there is great reward" (NIV).

Denying Our Will

We all have our own will. Even a little child in a crib has a will measured by its lung capacity.

We all like to have our own way. Some of us would like perpetual holidays; others are continual party goers. We enjoy doing things that please us, and we would be happy if the whole world revolved around us.

In contrast to our own sinful will is the will of God. The simple fact is that the world does not revolve around us, but around God. God is the center of all things, and He wants us to recognize that fact. If we do, we will be blessed. Following

God requires self-denial, the renunciation of our own sinful will. Cain should have renounced his will when the desire rose in him to kill Abel. Similarly, Lot should have renounced his will when Abram gave him first choice. We too, must renounce or deny our will when we are tempted to do only what pleases us or what is most advantageous to us.

A story about young John Calvin illustrates this. When Calvin was twenty-seven, he was forced to flee France, his homeland, because of persecution to his faith. Calvin loved studying and planned to learn a great deal more. He loved the Bible, and desired nothing more than to be able to write good books somewhere in a small rented room. That was all he really wanted and all he thought he needed. But God did not agree.

Calvin arrived in Geneva one night, planning to journey on again the following day. While he was there, he was visited by a man of small stature and piercing eyes. Farel had been preaching the gospel in Geneva for several years and found the task too much for one man. He minced no words as he said to Calvin: "God has brought you here because there is much work for you to do; you must stay."

Calvin refused. He could see that if he stayed there would be no time left for his studies. Farel did not accept his excuses. Standing up, he thundered at Calvin: "In the name of Almighty God, I declare that your studies are merely a pretext; if you refuse to dedicate yourself to God's work here, God will curse you, because you seek yourself and not Christ."

It seemed to Calvin that God Himself had spoken, and he dared not disobey. He denied his own will and remained in Geneva.

We and All Men

We should pay attention to the fact that the catechism says that *we and all men* should renounce our own will. Why does the catechism mention other people? Because God's will is not only valid for believers, but for all men.

It's not right to say that a Christian may not blaspheme, but a non-Christian may. It's not true that a believer should keep Sunday holy, but an unbeliever can desecrate it. Christians are not a strange, unusual people. Unbelievers are the ones who depart from the norm, in the sense that they refuse to do what God wants them to do. This is why we pray that also they may come to do God's will.

A normal world is a world in which everyone does what God asks them to do.

A Christian school is a normal school. A Chris-

tian political party is a normal political party. God has created the world in such a way that all will go well if everyone does what He says.

How Do We Know the Will of God?

Abram knew God's will because God spoke directly to him. The rich young ruler knew God's will because Jesus spoke to him. But how do we know God's will?

We know God's will from His Word. God wrote that Word down in a book—the Bible. Every Sunday that Word is preached to us and we hear God's will made known to us for our everyday lives. We can also read the Bible ourselves, continually understanding better what God asks of us.

Listening and reading, though, are not enough. We must also pray to God, asking Him to open His Word to us through His Holy Spirit. Without prayer, without His Holy Spirit, His Word will simply pass us by.

How shall the young direct their way?
What light shall be their perfect guide?
Thy Word, O Lord, will safely lead,
If in its wisdom they confide.
Sincerely I have sought Thee, Lord,
O let me not from Thee depart;
To know Thy will and keep from sin
Thy Word I cherish in my heart.

Having asked for His guidance through Word and Spirit, we must then also be prepared to follow through with: "Thy will be done." "Grant that we and all men may renounced our own will, and without any gainsaying obey Thy will . . ."

Without Gainsaying

Perhaps the most difficult part in keeping God's will is not to argue. Most people like to argue and complain. The Israelites repeatedly complained in the desert. Many young people, while not actually refusing to do what they are told by their parents, obey only reluctantly and grudgingly. In a technical sense they obey, yet in a moral sense they don't. They comply in deed, but not in spirit.

The Lord wants all of us to be cheerful as we do His will. This is only possible through prayer. One of the most astonishing things in the history of the church is that martyrs sang as they were being burned at the stake.

Only God can give us such a spirit. He can show us that His presence is the most beautiful thing that can happen to us.

Office and Calling

from God.

Lord's Day 12 teaches us that being a Christian means being prophet, priest and king. These three offices are for all believers, including young Christians. A prophet transmits the Word of God. A priest transmits the love of God. A king rules the world in Christ's name.

This threefold office is a tremendous task. In the third petition of the Lord's Prayer we ask God to equip us for that office. On our own, we can do nothing, but through His Holy Spirit God can teach us about this threefold office.

A calling involves a place in life through which we can do things for our fellow man. A farmer has a calling, and so does a housewife. A doctor has a calling, as does a factory worker. The work involved in any of these is not a necessary evil, because we need income. On the contrary, God has created the world in such a way that all people can work together to help build it up. Together they can enhance the quality of life in the world. This is why God has given a unique place to every person.

We must come to see our work as service to our God. If we come to realize that, then even the most menial task is consecrated to the service of our God and King. Through the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask God that we may be true and loyal to Him in the simplest of life's endeavors.

As the Angels in Heaven

The third petition of the Lord's Prayer also points to heaven. In heaven angels discharge their work before God. There are different types of angels—there are archangels, cherubims and seraphims; there are thrones, powers and dominions; there are also angels lower than these thrones and dominions.

Yet despite their difference in rank, they are alike in one aspect—they all seek to do God's will. They faithfully and joyfully discharge their duties, forever singing "Glory to God." In this petition Jesus holds them up as our example. The thought that He wants to pass on to us is that they are happy only because they accomplish God's will. We can also be happy, if we follow their example.

Angels come to earth to help believers. Hebrews 1:14 tells us: "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (NIV). As they surround us, let them not find us selfish and unwilling, but rather praying, seeking to accomplish God's will.

For Adults

People have always distinguished between the will of God's decree and His hidden will, the will of God's command and His revealed will. Why and how did people arrive at these distinctions?

The difference can best be shown through an example. We can say that God did not really want Judas to betray Jesus, because this great sin conflicted with His will. But we can also say that God wanted Judas to betray Jesus since "the Son of Man will go just as it is written about Him" (Matt. 26:24 NIV), and because during the period of Jesus' humiliation everything happened at the time appointed by the Father.

In the first case, we speak of the will of God's commandment or God's revealed will: God had revealed and commanded that Judas should love Jesus. In the second case, we are referring to the will of God's decree or His hidden will: God had ordained that through this treachery Jesus would become the Redeemer of the world.

Another example is that of the sale of Joseph by his brothers which was clearly a sin against God's revealed will. Yet it happened according to God's hidden will since Joseph, as regent of Egypt, was destined to save his father's household and prepare a place for the people of Israel.

The distinction between the two wills of God is made because the Bible speaks of it. This does not mean, however, that God has two conflicting wills. God has only one will, holy and good. The apparent contradictions cannot be attributed to God's will but rather to our own limited understanding of God's will. "For we know in part and we prophesy in part" (I Cor. 13:9 NIV). In heaven we will come to know perfectly the unity of God's will.

On the Textbook

1. What does it mean to be "self-willed"?
2. Would it be easier to obey God if He would speak to us personally?
3. How did Abram show his obedience to God? Was it easy?
4. How did God reward Abram for being obedient?
5. What is "self-denial"? Why does God demand that we deny ourselves?
6. How did Farel call John Calvin to deny himself?
7. Why would the catechism say "we and all men," instead of "all believers"?
8. What does it take to be truly "normal"?

9. How does God tell you what His will is?
10. What is "gainsaying"? What does it mean to do God's will without gainsaying?
11. What is a "calling"? Who has a calling? Do you?
12. What is your calling, according to Lord's Day 12? How can you work that out?
13. Why does the Lord Jesus mention the angels in this petition?

On the Bible

1. Read Mark 14:36; John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 7:16, 17; 14:18; Matthew 7:21; 12:46-50, and James 1:22-25. Why did Jesus come to earth, according to these passages? What characterized His life and death? Do you call yourselves brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus (you have been adopted by His Father)? Who may rightfully claim this privilege? How might we be "deceiving ourselves," according to James 1:22? What do you think God means in Romans 8:29, about being "conformed to the likeness of His Son," and about Jesus being the "firstborn among many brothers"? What do you think "the likeness" of Jesus is, keeping the above passages in mind?
2. Read Isaiah 1, and Amos 8:1-6. Hadn't God demanded that Israel worship Him (as for example, in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy)? Did God change His mind about what He wanted from Israel? Why does He call their Sabbath worship the "trampling of My courts"? How was Israel looking at the Sabbath, according to Amos 8? Compare what Samuel says to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:22-23. What is the summary of God's will? Read Matthew 22:37-40. What do you think "self-willed worship" might be? Could we also fall into that sin? How?

For Discussion

1. God forbids murder in the sixth commandment. Why then does Peter say that Jesus was "handed over . . . by God's set purpose and foreknowledge"? God forbids false witness against the neighbor. Why then does Jesus say that His betrayal by Judas was "decreed," that is, according to God's will? Read Deuteronomy 29:29 for some help. According to that verse, what do you think God asks of you when He commands that you do His will?
2. What is God's will for your life? your marriage? your occupation? your health? How do you know the answers to these questions?
3. Oral Roberts, a television evangelist, claimed in 1987 that he had received a vision from God, threatening him with death if he did not raise a certain amount of money within a specified amount of time. How would you react to this claim? How might you test it, to see whether it is indeed the will of God?

Lord's Day L

Illustration:

**Genesis
41:25-36**

Where does our food come from? We eat cereal for breakfast, bread for lunch and a hot meal for supper. No one stops

to think about it much. It's an accepted blessing. Groceries are bought at regular intervals, and we write cheques to pay for them.

Of course, if there is no food available, money can't buy it. During the famine winter of 1944-45, thousands of people in the Netherlands suffered severe hunger and died of starvation. A lot of people were ecstatically happy dining on sugar beets and potato peels. Thousands of people trekked into the countryside, searching and begging for food.

If you think of it, it's rather extraordinary to have food on the table every day. God, who ordains all things, has arranged our life in such a way that we can eat today and will eat tomorrow.

Think of Joseph in prison. Forgotten by all, it seemed that he was destined to die there. Not even the cupbearer, for whom Joseph had predicted life and wealth, remembered him. God, Joseph's heavenly Father, was the only one who remembered him, freeing him from prison in a most peculiar way.

He let Pharaoh dream—a series of images passed through his mind. In his dream Pharaoh stood by the banks of the river Nile and saw seven sleek, fat cow emerging from that river. They climbed onto the bank and grazed in the lush grass among the reeds. As they were feeding, seven more cows surfaced, ugly and gaunt, skin over bones. Then, unbelievably strange, the emaciated, bony cows devoured the seven sleek cows, hide and hair. Startled, the king awakened. Perhaps he dismissed the whole thing as a nightmare. When he fell asleep again, though, he was troubled by a second dream.

This time he saw before him seven heads of grain, healthy and good, growing on a single stalk. They were beautiful to look at, pleasing to the eye. Immediately the same stalk produced seven other heads of grain, but these were thin and scorched by the east wind. Then the incredible happened. It seemed as if the thin heads of grain sprouted

mouths and they greedily swallowed up the seven healthy heads.

Again Pharaoh woke up, but he was troubled. He could not attribute both dreams to mere coincidence. He concluded that it was a sign from the gods, a sign which he could not interpret. Summoning all his magicians and wise men, he told them his dreams, but they could not interpret them. Perhaps they tried, contradicting each other in the process, but Pharaoh was not satisfied.

Then the chief cupbearer remembered Joseph. And it is in these strange circumstances that God frees Joseph from prison. When Joseph came before Pharaoh, God gave Him the insight to interpret the dreams. The seven cows and the seven healthy heads of grain meant seven years of abundance, a time during which the people of Egypt would enjoy unprecedented prosperity. But they would be followed by seven years of severe famine, during which the abundance would be forgotten. Joseph advised Pharaoh to take precautions. Pharaoh did and time proved these dreams and their interpretation as correct.

God has authority over cows and grain; He provides our daily bread. He rules all His people, and His providence directs all of life.

The Only Fountain of Good

In Lord's Day 50 the catechism says that God is "the only fountain of all good." That is worth thinking about. We eat three meals a day which consist of food that was *grown*. The grain from which flour was made, grew in the field. Cattle gain weight and grow, and we eat meat. Tea-leaves are grown and we sip our cup of tea. Is this growth merely a matter of nature running its course? What is nature? Is it power in itself, automatically causing growth? Can we say that things "just" happen? Is it so that the sun appeared by chance one day, warming the earth, enabling plants to grow and allowing people and animals alike to live? Was the cow's stomach, with its four complex compartments, designed by

chance, producing milk as a mere fortuitous sideline for human consumption? People who believe this delude themselves.

The Bible teaches something much more impressive and much more beautiful: "But You, O God, are my king from of old; You bring salvation upon the earth. It was You who opened up springs and streams; You dried up the ever-flowing rivers. The day is Yours, and Yours also the night; You establish the sun and moon. It was You who set all the boundaries of the earth; You made both summer and winter" (Ps. 74:12 and 15 NIV), "He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart" (Ps. 104:10, 11, 14 and 15 NIV).

God has made all things, both the large and the small. In His great wisdom He first made the plan in His eternal council, and through His Word He created all things accordingly. He created everything so beautifully that He is the fountain of all good. He has always provided, and will always provide for our daily needs. Jesus teaches us to ask Him for this.

Recognition Why must we ask God for these things? Isn't it true that people who don't ask are also provided for? Yes, but the point is not the fact that we get our food but rather the manner in which we get it. We are not animals, even though they may serve as an example here. Isaiah wrote: "The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isa. 1:3 NIV).

Often animals are more grateful and loyal to their owners than we are to God. Should people not be much more grateful to their Creator and heavenly Father. The catechism says: "That we may thereby *acknowledge* Thee to be the only fountain of all good." To acknowledge something is to admit or confess to something. We were created in order to praise God, and every day gives us sufficient reason to do so, even if we only marvel at our daily bread.

Need Is bread enough? Most people are used to a little more than just bread, like butter and meat. Jesus does not ex-

pect us to live on dry bread; we also need drink. Jesus Himself was known to drink wine, and at the sea of Galilee He once asked His disciples: "Friends, haven't you any fish?" (John 21:5 NIV).

The word "bread" in the fourth petition, is meant by Jesus to encompass all that is necessary to live on. This includes money, clothes and a roof over our heads. It also includes, however, a grateful heart. Unfortunately, many people are dissatisfied with what they have and always want more. They are chronic complainers much like the Israelites in the desert, who constantly found fault with the manna and yearned for the fleshpots of Egypt.

The catechism speaks of "bodily needs," which means having no more and no less than what we require. These needs will vary from one person to the next. For a minister it might include books for study, and a vehicle to visit his congregation. It is important to remember, though, that when our "needs" are filled, we must be truly grateful to God, from whose hand it comes.

Blessing Food is not sufficient though. When we pray before we eat we ask God's blessing. Even our children are taught to pray, "Lord, bless this food and drink, for Jesus' sake, Amen."

What does that mean? The catechism puts it this way: "That without Thy blessing neither our care and labor, nor Thy gifts can profit us." When something profits you, it means that something happens to your benefit. A person can eat, work and live, without having things go well for him. A person can live in riches and still be headed down the road to eternal destruction. A person can abuse his energy and ruin his life.

With God's blessing, these things will not happen, because He will teach you how to dedicate your life to His glory. In this way your body will become a temple of the Holy Spirit and you will see your daily bread as food on your journey to eternal life.

For Adults The fourth petition points to the value of our bodies. The question arises: Why does Jesus first speak about our daily bread and only later mention the forgiveness of our sins? Underlying this question is the thought that our bodies are of relative unimportance. This idea originated in ancient Greece, where it was widely believed that the body is only a prison for the soul. Thus, when the body was gone, the soul

was freed.

But this is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible honors the human body as part of God's creation. One day our bodies will be resurrected and will live on a new earth. This is why the Lord Jesus also redeemed the human body. He Himself appeared in human form, and when He ascended into heaven, His body went with Him.

We may, therefore, pray for our bodily existence. Our bodies need care and we may not neglect them. Constructive sports, proper hygiene and healthy eating habits are all in agreement with the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer; neglect and misuse of our bodies conflict with it.

The fourth petition is also closely related to *social* needs. The social aspect of this petition refers to our responsibility towards others, and our awareness of their needs. The rich man in the parable did not care about the needs of others. He let Lazarus literally starve to death on his doorstep.

Jesus teaches us to pray for *our* daily bread. He implies that we should be aware of the needs of others, that is, other children of our heavenly Father. This refers, in the first place, to members of our congregation. No one in the church should suffer want. In the second place, others refers to our neighbors, fellow human beings, of whom Jesus said that God also has mercy on them. In our acts of mercy we must mirror God's mercy, relieving suffering and striving to share the world's food supply fairly.

On the Textbook

1. Why is it extraordinary that you have food to eat each day?
2. What did Pharaoh dream about? What did it mean?
3. What did Joseph do to help save the people from starvation?
4. What does it mean that God is "the only fountain of all good"?
5. Who is more grateful: people, or animals? Explain.
6. Why does God want us to ask for "our daily bread"?
7. What kinds of things are included in "our daily bread"?
8. Does everyone have the same needs? How can we decide what we need?

9. Why do we need God's blessing on His gifts and our work?
10. Explain why it is that people receive their daily bread even when they don't ask God for it.

On the Bible

1. Read Matthew 6:19-34. What is Jesus warning against in this passage? Does He want us to stop working? Should we be like birds, who don't sow, harvest, or store food in barns? Shouldn't we be concerned about feeding ourselves and our families? Why are we of more value than the birds and flowers? What did God create us to do? Why do we need food, drink and clothing? What do the pagans "run after"? Why do they run after those things? But what are Christians supposed to seek? Will we always have all that we want? Or all that we need?
2. Read Numbers 11:4-6, 18-20, 31-34; and Psalm 78:17-31. Where were the Israelites when this happened? Who were "the rabble with them"? Why did God become so angry? What did He tell Moses to tell them? What was the real sin of the people (read verse 20b)? Who sent the quail to the camp? Why did it turn into a disaster? What did Israel need more than they needed meat? Check Lord's Day 50 again. What does it mean to "put God to the test" (Ps. 78:18)? How did Jesus answer Satan when he tempted Jesus to put God to the test (Matt. 4:4; check Deut. 8:3)?

For Discussion

1. "God is majestic, holy, high above the earth. How can I be so arrogant as to think that He is interested in my clothing, or my breakfast, or the place I live?" How do you answer this person? "I go to work forty hours a week. On Friday I get my paycheck. I go to the bank, get some cash, and buy whatever I need to care for myself and my family. I earn my daily bread. No one can tell me that God gives it to me." How do you answer this person?
2. Some Christians believe that buying insurance of any kind, or receiving vaccinations against serious diseases is a rejection of God's Fatherly care. Other Christians believe that God wants them to act responsibly, and so they buy insurance and get vaccinations. Come up with

some arguments in favor of both opinions. Think of some other problem areas. For example, would it be irresponsible for a Christian to quit a job in which he would have to work on Sundays, or join an unchristian labor union? What if jobs were quite scarce?

Lord's Day LI

Illustration: **Matthew** **18:21-35**

If there is anyone you dislike immensely, then you will realize how difficult it is to really forgive. There are people so conceited that you sincerely hope they will trip up once and fall flat on their face. There are those who have cheated you at some point in your life, and you can literally smell that revenge would be sweet.

Remember how Peter, enthusiastic disciple of Christ, but quite pleased with himself, once asked his master: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matt. 18:21 NIV). Peter very likely thought: "That's quite generous on my part. Most people wouldn't have said that! But surely there must be some point where you no longer have to forgive someone."

But Jesus answers in this way: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matt. 18:22 NIV). In other words, the point at which you can no longer forgive someone does not exist. Why not? Because God, our Father in heaven, continues to forgive us, until we die. We keep on sinning, and our heavenly Father keeps on forgiving.

Jesus then proceeded to tell His disciples a parable about God's forgiveness and human severity. A servant had deeply indebted himself to his king. He must have had a very important position, perhaps that of treasurer, to have lost money amounting to ten thousand talents (several million dollars). He had probably lost it over a number of years, continually taking a bit here and a bit there, but in the end the crime was discovered.

It is no wonder that the king became angry. He "ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt" (Matt. 18:22 NIV). But then, in agony of spirit, the servant fell on his knees before the king, begging for mercy, and the astonishing fact is that the king took pity on him and forgave him his debt.

As the servant, who should have been extremely thankful, walked home, he met one of his fellow servants. Now this man owed him a hundred denari (only a few dollars). The first servant, however, was avaricious and grabbed him by the throat, choking

him while he demanded, "Pay back what you owe me!" (Matt. 18:28b NIV). Terrified, the debtor fell to his knees and begged, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back" (Matt. 18:29 NIV). But greed had turned his heart to stone and he had his fellow servant thrown into jail until he could pay the debt.

When the king heard what had happened he was furious. How unbelievably ungrateful! Although his own huge debt had been cancelled, he could not forgive someone else a smaller debt. The servant was recalled before the king and this time there was no pardon. In anger the king turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back all he owed. Considering the amount of his debt, it was not possible that the ungrateful servant would ever be released.

The purpose of the parable was summed up in Jesus' words: "This is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35 NIV).

Talent and Denariis

We can sometimes become unreasonably angry over little things. A student can be irritated with his teacher because he got a 'D' and he thought he should have had a 'B'. A girl can be upset with her mother because she was asked to do the dishes just when she had planned to do something else.

It's not hard to get angry and sometimes we have good reason. People can be inhuman to each other, and forgiveness can be most difficult. Think of parents who have their child kidnapped and murdered. Think of someone who has spent years in prison as a result of false testimony. But the Lord Jesus calls even the worst of these grievances small compared to the great debt that we owe God.

Why are we so indebted to God? Why does the catechism speak of "our transgressions" against Him? Because God is our heavenly Father. It is already sad when children ignore their parents; but it is worse, far worse, when the children of God ignore their heavenly Father. That is a great sin, a sin which will result in eternal darkness. God is light,

the light and life necessary for mankind. Anyone who willfully ignores that light will inevitably end up in darkness.

Man's great sin is the sin against God—it is the sin of the ten thousand talents.

Forgiveness The greatest miracle in the world is that God forgives this sin. As the king in the parable cancelled the infinite debt, so God forgives. This eternal truth is proven to many by Jesus Christ, God's only Son, who died for sin. Jesus said, "It is finished." The Greek word for this is *telelestai*—paid. It was a word written on invoices which had been paid. Our debt has been paid—completely—and we may know with a beautiful certainty that God forgives all our sins if we believe in Jesus Christ.

Praying for Forgiveness Jesus wants us to pray for forgiveness every day. Similar to our need for food each day, is our need for the daily forgiveness of our sins.

There are people who have said that this is excessive. Sin was forgiven once and for all when Jesus died; so why do we have to be forgiven time and again? This is nothing but a rationalization of something we should not attempt to put into words. You could also say, my parents love me; no matter what I do they will always love me; therefore, because they will always be my parents, it doesn't really matter what I do. Clearly this is nonsense! If you hurt your parents, you know that your conscience will bother you until you have made things right. Our relationship with our heavenly Father is similar. Sometimes we're not very aware of our sins, of the fact that we have transgressed against Him. At other times, though, we are painfully aware of these sins and they loom larger than life. Every day we sin again—we forget God and do things without Him. Each day again we have to confess that we sinned, we neglected and forgot, and each day He allows us to call Him Father again. If we sincerely pray, "Forgive us our debts," He will remove our debts. We may pour out our hearts to Him for He listens to us, and He will always take care of us.

Our Debtors When things are right between God and us, they *must* also be right between our neighbors and us. This is why

Jesus adds the phrase: "As we also have forgiven our debtors." If we remember the ten thousand talent debt that God forgave us, if we realize the immensity of that miracle, then we may not harbor petty grievances against other people.

This is not always easy. Examples were already listed which were anything but petty. This is why the catechism uses sensitive language, not bluntly stating that forgiveness is simple. It says, "As we also find this witness of Thy grace in us that it is our full purpose heartily to forgive our neighbor." Note that the phrase "this witness of Thy grace," indicates that forgiving others is not a matter of our own doing. If it were left up to us, we would, no doubt, stare people into the grave. There is also the phrase "that it is our full purpose," indicating that while it may be our heartfelt intent and wish to forgive others, it is frequently far from easy.

It is honest to say that our hearts often boil in rage. We may want to forgive, but sometimes it seems impossible. Yet, if we genuinely believe in the Lord Jesus, we cannot continue to surrender to hateful feelings. They will always leave us *troubled*, because they will not conform to the love of Christ. We shall have to fight to accomplish the forgiveness God asks of us. But if we pray, we will be able to do what He asks and the witness of God's grace will come to us, through God's Holy Spirit.

What the Holy Spirit Can Do Two more mission accounts are related to show the power of God's Holy Spirit.

On the island of Sumatra a woman was to be baptized. She had been instructed in the Christian faith by a missionary. Also attending these catechism classes, however, was a chieftain who years before had killed her husband. The chieftain asked the woman to lay her hand in his as a sign to show she had forgiven him. At first she refused, saying, "In my heart I have forgiven him. But to put my hand in the hand that murdered my husband is too much to ask." And yet she felt that she must do this. Conquering her feelings, though she trembled violently, she was able to place her hand in his as a sign of complete reconciliation.

A similar story comes from New Guinea. Christian converts had gathered to celebrate communion, and knelt around the communion table to receive the bread and wine. One native who had been kneeling, suddenly jumped up, leaving the table abruptly, only to return a short while later.

Afterwards, the missionary asked him why he had done this. He replied: "When I approached the table, I had no idea who would sit beside me. To my

dismay I discovered that I sat next to the man who had killed my father several years ago, and drank his blood—a man I had sworn to kill. Imagine the feeling that tore my soul when I suddenly found myself kneeling beside him! I could not handle it. I broke out in a sweat and returned to my place. As I reached my seat, however, I saw the heavenly glory and the great wedding banquet and I thought I heard a voice that said to me: 'All men will know that you are My disciples if you love one another' (John 13:25 NIV). That voice overwhelmed me, and as I sat down I seemed to see a cross and a man nailed to it and I heard Him say: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.' This made me return to the communion table."

For Adults

The catechism distinguishes between "any of our transgressions" and "the evil which always cleaves to us."

"Any of our transgressions" refers to our daily sins. We don't always realize how serious they are. The word "sin" can easily turn into a paper tiger not particularly frightening us anymore. If we try to imagine, however, what life would be like if we, like the disciples, would always be present with Jesus, then we can also begin to comprehend what sin is. We would be able to understand what Peter meant when he cried: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8 NIV).

To realize what sin is, we have to recognize the power behind it. "The evil which always cleaves to us." From the beginning of our life we had our own desires, our inclinations, and our nature, and none of them were directed towards God. All of them focussed on ourselves. In Lord's Day 2 we read: "I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor." Lord's Day 2 reflects the reality of *original sin*. That reality is a brutal fact for anyone who truly knows himself. However, God's grace is stronger. The Holy Spirit wants to take away that original sin. He wants to give us a new heart through regeneration.

But even then, there is still "*the evil which always cleaves to us*"; but there will also always be "this witness of Thy grace in us."

On the Textbook

1. How many times did Peter think you ought to forgive your brother?
2. What did Jesus say? What did He mean by that?

3. How much money did the first servant owe his master? How did he escape being sent to prison?
4. How much money did the second servant owe? What happened to him?
5. What did the king do when he found out?
6. How did Jesus sum up the purpose of His parable?
7. How does the worst sin against another person compare to our sin against God?
8. If our sins against others are less serious than our sins against God, should we perhaps stop being concerned about them?
9. What is the greatest miracle in the world?
10. What is the meaning of "tetelestai"? What does that mean for forgiveness?
11. How often does Jesus want us to pray for forgiveness? Why?
12. Why does the author think it is hard to forgive others' sins against us?
13. What gifts does God give us in order to enable us to forgive others?

On the Bible

1. Read Genesis 4:19-24. Who was Lamech? What were his wives' names? What did his sons do? What was Lamech's boast? How many times did he say he would be avenged? Compare that to what Jesus said about the number of times we must forgive one another. What is Lamech saying? Will there ever be any end to his revenge? Whose kingdom does Lamech represent? When someone sins against you, do you feel more like doing what Lamech says, or what Jesus says? What does that tell you about yourself? What is the solution to this problem?
2. Read 1 John 1:8-2:11. How can we "deceive ourselves," and make God "out to be a liar"? What will happen if we confess our sins? Who will speak for you when you do sin? Why does John call Him "the Righteous One"? What must those do who "claim to live in Him"? Does John think this is a new command? How old is it? Can a Christian hate his brother? What is "the darkness"? (For help, read John 1:4, 5; and 3:19-21.) What is "the light"?

For Discussion

1. A convicted killer on death row is converted to Christianity, and speaks of his confidence in God's forgiveness of his crime. The family of the victim comes forward to announce that they have forgiven him. What does the governor do—grant the state's pardon, or carry out the death sentence?
2. "I just can't do it. She did me wrong. And she isn't repenting. She isn't sorry at all. I don't believe I have to forgive her." What do you think? Why?

Lord's Day LII

Illustration: The final petition of the Lord's Prayer deals with temptation. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was "tempted in every way, just as we are" (NIV).

The most obvious of the temptations occurred at the beginning of His work as Israel's Messiah. It was when He had just been baptized and the Spirit, who had anointed Him (Lord's Day 12) had descended upon Him. This was the moment the devil tempted Him.

At this point Jesus was the *second Adam*. The first Adam had also been tempted when he had begun his work as king of creation. He had fallen, and consequently, all of his children had become fallen royal children.

Jesus as the second Adam, is also tempted. The devil also wants to make Him fall, but even this work of the devil is subject to God's decree because the Bible says: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (Matt. 4:1 NIV).

God had a purpose in this: Jesus would soon show that the devil was not lord and master and that evil would not conquer; but that He had come to destroy the devil's work (I John 3:8). To prepare for this battle, Jesus fasted for a period of forty days and forty nights. Throughout this period He focussed His soul completely on God and on the calling He would accomplish in Israel.

But Jesus was also human and at the end of this prolonged period His body was exhausted and hungry. It was in this moment of His physical weakness that the devil launched his assault. Although we do not know what form he took, we do know that he said to Jesus: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" (Matt. 4:3 NIV).

This temptation was greater and more powerful than the one which had faced the first Adam. Adam had a Paradise laden with fruit, and did not know the meaning of the word hunger. What need had he of the forbidden fruit? Jesus, however, was famished, and it was within His power to turn stones into bread. Why should He not?

The temptation, the enticement to evil, lay hid-

den in the fact that Jesus would begin to feel sorry for Himself, only thinking of His own needs. If He had given in, He would never have been able to suffer as completely as He did for our sin. He had to trust His heavenly Father in everything! As our true Messiah He overcame this temptation, appealing to the Bible: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4 NIV). That passage can be found in Deuteronomy 8:3, where it refers to the manna with which God nourished His people in the desert. In other words, Jesus said: "There is no need for Me to provide for Myself; God will provide for Me with the means He has chosen."

The devil lost the first round, but he immediately launched the second. He took Jesus, possibly only in a vision, but, considering the extent of his power, possibly in reality, to stand on the highest point of the temple roof, saying: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command His angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone' " (Matt. 4:6 NIV).

The devil was subtle. Because Jesus had appealed to Scripture, he resorted to using Scripture himself, trying to mislead Jesus. The temptation here was that Jesus would indulge in an unnecessary miracle, pleasing to Himself, but totally unrelated to the fulfillment of His calling as Messiah. Not succumbing, Jesus replied: "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test' " (Matt. 4:7 NIV). Not putting God to the test means that you shouldn't tempt God to see just how far you can go to make Him protect you. Anyone can jump from a roof inviting God to rescue him. But it is a temptation, challenging God's power. We may ask for God's protection when we find ourselves in danger, but we may not do so if we deliberately put ourselves in danger.

The devil launched one more assault. He now led Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. The splendor of all the nations passed before Jesus. The devil tempted again: "All this I will give You, if You will bow down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9 NIV).

The devil thought himself ruler of the world, and, in a certain sense, he was. Through sin, he had obtained great power. The Bible itself calls his evil spirits "authorities and powers of this dark world" (Eph. 6:12). The devil showed the power and might of the world to Jesus, suggesting that the way of humiliation and death was not necessary for Him to obtain lordship over it. One bow to the devil, and the world would be His.

But would the world be the Messiah's? If Jesus had given in to this temptation, He would have been satan's servant and not the servant of the Lord. The kingdom of God would not have been possible any more.

Withstanding this temptation also, Jesus said: "Away from Me, satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only'" (Matt. 4:10 NIV).

Having been defeated, satan then left Him.

The Evil One Adam was tempted by the devil and fell into sin. Jesus was tempted by the devil and conquered sin. Who is the devil and why does he continually tempt us? The devil (diabolos or liar) or satan (antagonist) is called the evil one by Jesus. He is evil itself. This can never be said about anyone, believer or unbeliever. Man is *prone* to all evil, but through God's common grace retains a capacity for good.

The devil, however, has only evil within him. He is one of God's fallen angels who, together with all the other evil spirits who followed him in his rebellion, has only one single purpose. That purpose is to oppose God and corrupt His work.

In the beginning of creation he was successful. And when God, in His saving grace, sought to save the world, the devil tried, though unsuccessfully, to tempt Jesus into sin.

The devil continues, however, to "sift" the children of God "like wheat" (Luke 22:31). And just as God permitted satan to tempt Jesus, He also permits satan to tempt us. This is why Jesus teaches us to pray: "And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

How Are We Tempted? Does the devil come to us in the same way that he came to Jesus? Do we still hear his voice or see his shape? People used to think so. During the Middle Ages artists depicted the devil in visible form, usually with horns and the hooves of a goat. These descriptions, however, were borrowed

forest deities left over from paganism; the Bible doesn't present the devil to us in this way.

The Bible tells us: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12 NIV). Great powers are summed up here, but they are invisible powers.

Judas was led astray by satan; yet he never saw him. Judas only felt sharp disappointment in the Messiah who had turned out to be vastly different than he had dreamt; and Judas felt greed. Peter was "sifted" by satan, but did not see him. Peter learned that his opinion of himself had been too high and that basically he was very afraid.

The devil exploits *our human weaknesses*. Hence the catechism tells us, "We are so weak in ourselves that we cannot stand a moment." It also speaks of "our flesh" which does not "cease to assault us" and easily gives in to sin.

The devil also uses *all forms of temptations available in the world*. He presents the world as something that can make us rich and happy without God. The devil speculates that we all want to be number one; that we all want to get rich quickly; that we all seek to promote our own self-interest without thinking of others; and that we want to enjoy life without thinking of God's eternity.

It is obvious that the devil has ample opportunity to tempt us. He even attends church, snickering in the balcony and sleeping during the sermon.

Protection Protection against temptation can be found only in the Holy Spirit. At one point Peter, overly confident of his faithfulness to Christ, thought he could manage by himself—but he was flat on his back before he knew it.

God Himself has to protect us, and He does. If we ask Him in prayer, He will always send His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes all people, including children, into temples of God. This means that He lives in them, protects them, teaches them to fight against sin, and lifts them up when they fall into sin.

The Conflict The Holy Spirit also teaches us to fight. After he has spoken about the "power of this dark world," Paul says: "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done

everything, to stand" (Eph. 6:13 NIV).

We should not be misled into thinking that the Holy Spirit will preserve us without any effort on our part. The Bible also teaches that we can grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30), or put out the Spirit's fire (I Thess. 5:19). It is, therefore a Christian's duty to avoid tempting situations. These are things we should stay away from: pornography, sleazy literature, immoderate drinking, frequenting places of ill-repute, and friendship with the wrong people.

If we intentionally walk into temptation, we will not be able to pray sincerely, "Bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." That would be *tempting* God.

We have to prepare ourselves to meet temptation by putting on the full armor of God as mentioned by Paul. This armor consists of: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. We must continually practice using these weapons. One way to do this is to attend catechism. As we fight sin, using these weapons, we may confidently pray the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer.

The Doxology Having taught us to ask God for our physical and spiritual needs, Jesus ended the prayer with the doxology. He teaches us that praying is not simply a matter of asking; it is, above all, a glorification of God. In heaven we will be able to do that perfectly and we will sing: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10 NIV).

Our reason for existing now too, though, is to praise God. That is why Jesus gave us the doxology: "For Thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory forever." This doxology is not merely a wish for the future, but a declaration of a certain, glorious reality. The kingdom is His! He rules everything—yesterday, today and tomorrow. All power is His! There is no person alive who has any power without having first obtained it from God. Nature has no power without God. There is no nuclear power without God. Everything exists by virtue of "His powerful Word" (Heb. 1:3).

All glory is His! God's glory is brighter than the sun. God lives "in unapproachable light" (I Titus 6:13), and is the perfection of all beauty. He who prays cannot help but praise Him, for He is the greatest good.

The Last Word The final word of the perfect prayer is "amen." This does not mean "the end," but affirms the sincerity of our prayer and that God has listened. The word "amen" is derived from the Hebrew, denoting something immovable.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites were commanded by Moses to read the law again after they arrived in Canaan. The Levites were to recite it with a loud voice, and interspersing every sentence, the people of Israel as a whole were to say with one voice "Amen!" (Deut. 27:11-26). This was to show that all of Israel agreed with the law.

In the New Testament, when Jesus wanted to stress something, He continually used the word "amen," which was later translated as "verily" or "truly."

When we say "amen" we mean: "may it be so, for God has surely heard our prayer."

Dear Father, do not hide Thy face,
For we rely upon Thy grace.
Our hearts, O Lord, who seest all,
Condemn us not whene'er we call,
But say, since Thou dost hear our plea,
"Amen, Amen, so shall it be!"

For Adults There is a curious text in the Bible about temptation: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil nor does He tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:13-14 NIV).

God does not tempt anyone. Yet we pray, "Bring us not into temptation." There is, therefore a difference between bringing into temptation and leading into temptation. Leading someone into sin indicates a desire for that person to fall, whereas being brought into temptation refers to the guidance God has over our whole life—a guidance present also when we are tempted.

We can make the distinction between temptation and testing. God tests us in order to strengthen our faith, while the devil tempts us in order to deprive us of our faith.

Finally, recent versions of the Bible omit both the doxology and the word "amen." It is not certain whether these words belonged to the original Lord's Prayer. They are not included in the most ancient and most reliable manuscripts, and do not appear in Luke 11:2-4. It is generally believed that the doxology and "amen" were added later, because all prayers, including the Lord's Prayer, were ended this way in the earliest Christian communities. It is

difficult to know whether this is correct. The Christian church of all ages has included both the doxology and the word 'amen' and it would be hard to think of a more fitting conclusion to the Lord's Prayer.

On the Textbook

1. When did the "most obvious" temptations of Jesus occur? Were those the only temptations He faced?
2. Why does the author call Jesus "the second Adam"?
3. What was God's purpose in allowing Jesus to be tempted?
4. Why did satan choose this particular time to attack Jesus?
5. What was the first temptation? How did Jesus defend Himself?
6. What was the second temptation? How did Jesus defend Himself?
7. What was the final temptation? How did Jesus defend Himself?
8. Is satan the ruler of this world?
9. Is satan real? Is he allowed to tempt believers?
10. How does satan tempt you? What does he use?
11. What is our protection against temptation?
12. When is it impossible for us to pray this petition sincerely? Why?
13. What are the parts of "the armor of God"?
14. Why is the doxology added to the Lord's Prayer?
15. From what language does "amen" come, and what does it mean?

On the Bible

1. Read 1 Corinthians 10:11-13, and James 1:13-15. What things were "written down as warnings for us"? When does Paul think you are most likely to fall? Are my temptations unique? What temptation has seized me? What does Paul mean by that? What is our comfort in temptation? What will God provide? How do you think we can take hold of what God will provide for us? By what, according to James 1:14, are we tempted? What are the steps that lead from temptation to death?

Would it be right to say when we are tempted, "The devil made me do it"?

2. Read Genesis 3:1-6. Did Eve report God's words accurately? (Check ch. 2:16, 17.) How did the devil undermine God's command? What was it that was so appealing to Eve? It says in verse 6, "When the woman saw . . ." Did Eve see correctly? Why did she see the fruit as she did? Can you understand what happened? Does the same thing happen when we are tempted and fall into sin? Compare Eve's response to the response of Jesus. What is the great difference, besides the fact that Jesus didn't sin? How was God's Word treated in each of the situations? Read James 4:7, 8a for some excellent advice.

For Discussion

1. Read 2 Samuel 24:1, and 1 Chronicles 21:1. Does the Bible contradict itself? What about what James said in James 1:13? Reread your lesson from the book for some help, in the section entitled "For Adults."
2. "Temptation to sin is everywhere! Pornography, suggestive pictures and situations in advertising, novels, and television, obscene lyrics in songs, encouragement to spend our money on ourselves, chances to get rich quick in the lottery. The list goes on and on. The only solution is to get away from it all. The Amish and Mennonites are right. We must shelter ourselves and our children from all this temptation by living in separate and closed communities, dumping our T.V.'s and radios, magazines, newspapers — everything!" What do you think? Why do you think so?