



SHARING REFORMED CHRISTIAN RESOURCES AROUND THE WORLD

# *THE TRUE FAITH*

S. G. De Graaf  
Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism

Lord's Day 1- 22

*Translation by Rev. Richard Stienstra*

## **Preface**

Simon Gerrit De Graaf (1889-1955) was a well-known minister in Amsterdam. His popular and influential work **Verbondsgeschiedenis** (1936) was translated by Dr. Evan Runner in English as *Promise and Deliverance* (1977) and was widely read in the homes of the Reformed people of North America. In 1954 De Graaf's final work, **Het Ware Geloof** was published. Because of the author's developing inability to write, he had requested M. De Goede to finalize the composition of Lord's Days 21 and 22, based on the numerous detailed annotations De Graaf had prepared previously.

The redemptive historical insight, so helpful and illuminating for children and adults in *Promise and Deliverance*, becomes a profound covenantal beacon of light in *The True Faith*. In the last years of his life De Graaf's matured insight of Reformed theology, consistently and comprehensively applied to the Church's confession, produced a work that all Reformed preachers and teachers, as well as every serious believer should read and assimilate. The Commentary takes God's eternal love as the *motif* in creating and recreating, always showing that His covenant and all His works proceed from that one decree made in God's counsel of peace. I hope that in reading this work you too will broaden and deepen your insight into the Lord's ways and works. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Richard Stienstra

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## ***THE TRUE FAITH***

**S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

### **Lord's Day 1**

#### ***1. What is your only comfort in life and death?***

*That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil.*

*He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.*

*Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.*

#### ***2. What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?***

*First, how great my sins and misery are;*

*Second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery;  
Third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.*

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## ***The Confession of the Church***

When we focus our attention on the Heidelberg Catechism, we are dealing with a confessional statement of the church. For while the catechism may be a textbook for catechism classes, it is also a document in which the church expresses her confession. To put it differently, as a confessional record it also functions as textbook.

Thus at the very outset we face the reality that the church solemnly has expressed her faith and has recorded that confession in a document. Now, we could right away pose the question of what value it has for us that the church expresses her faith in this way. This question when asked at the beginning would surely reveal how much we are occupied with ourselves in our thinking and doing. For whoever seeks to live before the Lord by faith, this surely should not be the first question: what is in the church's confession for me?

Such an immediate application of the church's confession to oneself certainly cannot be defended by its starting point or even by the ongoing tone of the catechism itself. Of course, it is true that the catechism begins with the question: *What is your only comfort in life and death?* Later it asks *How does Christ's resurrection benefit us?* In addition, *But what does it help you now that you believe all this?* Yet all of this is possible as will be seen in due time, without using it as a defense for putting first the question of the confession's benefit for us personally.

When speaking about the confession of the church we normally point to the following two-fold purpose: the unity of the church within is protected by it, and she confesses to the outside world the truth of God over against the heresies of the day. A further purpose precedes that two-fold intent however, for in her confession she gives an answer to God Who revealed His truth to her.

Furthermore, in the church's confession there is first of all an element of devotion. Scripture indicates that this element should be evident in our whole life: *So whether you eat and drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God* (1 Cor. 10: 31). Now if that devotion or worship comes first in our whole life, then it is especially so in the most important purpose of our life, *i.e.* confessing God's Name.

Moreover, we note that there must be in the first place reverence and adoration in the church's confession follows from the fact that confessing comes by faith, and there cannot be faith without devotion. Faith in fact always looks up to its content, and submits to its source. Thus, faith takes hold of God's faithfulness and love even as He confirms this to our faith by His Word while our faith clings to them as divine faithfulness and divine love – too lofty for faith ever to be able to comprehend fully. It rests in God's faithfulness but is so far removed from it that it could never fully grasp that foundation; rather, it is overwhelmed by the breadth and the power of God's faithfulness. In faith we take hold of that by which faith itself has been taken hold of – an attribute as it were, because it itself is held onto as well. Thus, it is therefore hardly surprising that at the very heart of faith there is always adoration.

Up to now, we have made no distinction between the act and fact of the church's professing or confessing and her confession, between the act of her confessing and the content and substance of the confession considered. However, although in reality there is a distinction between these two, we must not produce a separation between them. For it is possible that the confession of the church could also be seen as the result of her confessing, the consequence then could be a factual adhering to it in its functioning, but in which she no longer worships the Lord. It is even possible that the church no longer lives by her confession, but that instead a distance has developed between the church and her confession. However, if she truly is church she would never disregard and neglect everything from that treasure, and yet much in it would be dead capital for her. In such a case, one cannot maintain in the strict sense of the word that the confession of the church is the result of her confessing or professing. The church's confessing must be a deed of adoration. Praise to the Lord must be raised in it, for this is the supreme outcome and purpose of her professing.

It is therefore necessary that the church always lives by and out of her confession in order that in the hearing and speaking of those words her adoration may be for God. That can only happen when those words, even now, still are the words from her heart – when she understands them and with her adoration serves their intent. The church may not lapse lower than her confessions.

It is only in this way, when in what the church confesses there actually and continually is the deed of her adoration that the two-fold purpose of her profession that we mentioned above – guarding the unity within and witnessing to the truth of God without – can come to its rightful expression.

The confession can never merely be an “agreement of ecclesiastical fellowship,” that is, an accord in the sense of a contract into which the parties enter. Her confession has no effective power to preserve the unity if the church does not meet God in reverence and devotion as she professes those words. Compelling efforts may then well be undertaken to keep the whole body together, but in reality unity is lacking. Nor does this mean that they would be able to relinquish the content of the confession and the faithfulness to that content for a shared religious feeling and a joint spiritual experience. Some might attempt to suggest there is a common religious sentiment present, even when there is no agreement with what is confessed. However, in praising God it is completely impossible to ignore the differences that still exist. Adoration or praise can only be an answer to the revelation that God has given us, uniquely in His Word. When we do not understand that revelation, or understand it incorrectly, we can never arrive at true worship. Such worship is made up of the acknowledgement of the truth of God as the church confesses this. However, just as the church at one time confessed in devotion, we can also only have true unity when her professing is an act of praise.

Furthermore, it is essentially impossible to convey the truth of God to the outside world unless the church confesses prayerfully. The church that limits, restricts, or controls her confession, and is elevated above and beyond her own faith, has become a worldly society and has nothing left to say to the world. The church is something special only when she looks up to the truth of God. She has the testimony of God and of Jesus Christ, and gives witness of the truth that is beyond her, which controls and liberates her. If the church’s view of and attitude toward her confession is different from that, such a confession will be heard by the unbelieving world as an empty slogan. For the world has such “principles” as well, and we would then come to it using the same approach since we would no longer have the testimony of God that overcomes the world.

This worshipful confession also brings comfort to the church. The objection is often directed against the catechism that comfort in life and death is placed front and center, and that it repeatedly asks questions about usefulness and benefit. Indeed this constant tenet of the catechism has done some harm to those who do not see this as the confession of the church, prayerfully articulated. However, is there for us anywhere we can find comfort, except in adoration and prayer? In the first chapter of the first book of his “Confessions” Augustine utters the prayer, *Let me know, o Lord, and understand what comes first: To call upon Thee, or to praise Thee!* The fact is that we cannot call on God as our help and comfort without praising Him. Both of these are jointly given and do not exist apart from each other. Sinful flesh pretending to be highly spiritual has attempted to pillage the catechism and sought to make comfort its own, even though it does not know its veneration. Clearly, they have not known the catechism as the confession of the church.

### ***The Church in Her Professing***

Thus, the question of what benefit the confession has for us personally comes to mind only in the second place. In that setting the catechism may be seen as a textbook. The confession is the church’s answer to God’s revelation as He has given this especially in His Word. The church sometimes has to speak her own word, but is continually subject to God’s Word, and does nothing other than respond. “Professing” in the Greek of the New Testament is *saying the same thing*. That can mean that we say the same thing as other people, or that we say something together. Sometimes it means also that we say the same thing as God. In her act of professing the church echoes the Lord.

And it is only in this reality that the certainty of the church’s confession exists; and thus the confession has the nature of the truth in which we rest. Of course, the church can err in echoing the Lord, but she is constantly corrected by God’s Word and compelled to reformation. That is the necessary consequence of the fact that the Word is the living Word, a

sharp two-edged sword – and in that sense one can speak of the infallibility of the church. The reason for that infallibility therefore is not in her, but in the power of God’s Word, which will always direct her to believe and to profess.

It is the calling of the church as a whole to profess the truth in this way, and not in the first place the calling of individual believers; for as separate and distinct persons they are not able. We can only *together with all the saints fully grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (Eph. 3: 18,19).

Behind this is that the fact that God’s Word is spoken not to individual believers, but to the people of the Lord’s church. In the entire Scriptures, both in the Old and the New Testaments, God directs Himself to His people. In addition, given the fact that the Word and the Spirit of God brought them to faith, they were also thereby in Christ recreated into a unity. God speaks in order that we should be one, for He *Who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were* (Rom.4:17) also produces that unity. Thus He addresses His people restored in unity.

Therefore when the church in her unity and harmony responds to God’s revelation, she is *the pillar and foundation of the truth* (1Tim.3: 15). That does not mean that truth itself needs support and therefore must find that in the church. Truth is the revelation of God that comes only from God, Who is the truth. In this world, however, truth finds a home, is confessed, protected, and defended in the venue which it itself has created. In this sense the church is a pillar and foundation of the truth and for us this expresses the significance of the church’s confession.

If we truly seek to understand this, we must distinguish two things in our relationship to the church. On the one hand, we are members of that church; we share in her formation and she is an integral part of us. Yet on the other hand, the church leads and directs us. Thus, the church is the gathering of believers who receive the truth of God by faith, and through such believing acceptance in fact become the church, which is and remains subject to that truth. However, it is equally true that she has the right and authority to formulate the truth of God in her confessions, and thus to lead and direct the life of her members. This latter function is the essence of the expression: *the pillar and foundation of the truth*.

We live as members of the church, for in baptism we received the seal indicating that we form part of it and thus participate in the fellowship and life of the church. We must not reject this sealed promise of God nor may we doubt it, but must accept it in faith. Through that faith our sense of community overcomes our self-conscious independence. In this way we learn to live as members of that fellowship and community. We can only believe in this way because the promises of God were spoken not in the first place to me, but to the people of His community. Only those people can therefore accept these promises, and I can do so only as a member of that fellowship.

A special emphasis is placed on personal faith and on personal application, which this fellowship of faith at times forgets or overlooks. When this happens they are opposing the Spirit of God because the Spirit is actively delivering us from our isolated position. Especially with those who speak much of the Holy Spirit we sometimes find such an emphasis placed on the faith of the isolated self. How little they have then understood of the work of the Spirit, Who through the Word recreates a faith-fellowship – a communion of faith!

The catechism speaks of “my” only comfort in life and death, and in this usage it continually refers to “I” and “my.” However, this cannot be used to counter the above. Whoever would do this loses sight of the fact that the catechism is a confession of the church. “I” speak here as a member of the church, and express a communal faith. That does not merely mean that this confession is accepted by us communally; “I” also speak here in the fellowship of the faith of God’s people.

As a member of the church, I share and participate in her confession. Her confession is my confession; and this affords an immense consolation. I share in the confession of the church, in which much more is expressed than for what I can yet personally account. Especially the person who has observed how limited the response is that he is able to give to God’s Word, and how slowly this ability to confess with understanding grows within him, is comforted by this. The church herself must continually develop in her ability to confess; however we also know that we will mature within her, and *be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (Eph.3:19). Nevertheless, being part of the church’s professing fellowship

entails the calling to know what she knows, to understand what she understands, and in doing so prayerfully to meet God, just as the church does.

To enable all members to fulfill that calling, the church herself gives leadership. Thus, we see the church in her role and authority formulating the truth of God in her confession, and through this confession she gives guidance to her life. She must teach the members to come to prayerful, worshipful profession, just as she herself may do this. Therefore she instructs not only all members in the confession through catechism preaching, but she instructs in particular the younger members in order to bring them to make profession in the manner she herself does.

If professing were something other or different than echoing and repeating the Lord, and if it were merely a subjective witness, there would be nothing to educate. Then all could be left to the Holy Spirit. A faithful, worshipful confession however, exhibits a deed of obedience. If we wish to be able to obey, we must first listen and learn. Thus, the church educates her youth in order that they should come to the act of obedience in their profession.

In this way the church teaches the Word of God, as she through the Holy Spirit learned to repeat it, and in her confession formulated its content. Thus, she teaches her confession with the authority she has for this as the pillar and foundation of the truth. Her authority in her professing therefore does not impede the unique authority of God's Word. Indeed, she draws her authority exclusively from the Word of God. Through the derived authority in her professing, the authority of the Word of God is discovered increasingly. The magnificence and dignity of the Word of grace is revealed more fully when we see that the church has received the office in order to speak with authority the truth of God based on that Word. Only the splendor of the Word of grace and that of grace itself leads to adoration and worship. Thus, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, through the teaching of her confessions the church educates her members, particularly her youth, to profess with adoration.

### ***Faithful Submission to the Word of God***

In absorbing the entire content of the catechism, and especially in understanding the first Lord's Day which introduces all that follows, one must continually hold on to the fact that professing or confessing is a repeating of and an answer to what God has said.

Only in this way can we confess that we belong to Jesus Christ. This confession can never be a conclusion based on what one feels he has experienced in belonging to Christ. For experience is always the fruit of faith and not its foundation; thus the experience of union with Christ is a result of the faith of that belonging. Such faith needs to find its foundation in something else.

However, we may not deduce nor infer our faith from the church's confession. There is a danger that people will expect to see faith generated by the confession of the church, that is, through what in her ecclesiastical context has always been considered as truth. And if one would not look any further than this activity of the church, one would not have seen it as answer – an obedient answer – to God's Word. Whoever understands that confession as a faithful submission and response to God's revelation, has learned to answer in faith for himself. A church is not above nor beyond its confession, and neither is any single believer greater than his faith. When we said earlier that our sense of self-consciousness could not be primary, we did not mean to imply that we should let the church direct us so that our personal life would lose all value. When we by faith have understood that the church in her confession is obedient to God's Word, our own life is therein also submissive, and our personal life is thereby liberated and reaches its true worth in that fellowship.

With the confession that we belong to Jesus Christ, we are subservient to God's Word. God has said in His Word to that congregation of which we are a part, that we belong to Him and sealed this to us through baptism by which we are incorporated into the Christian church. In our faithful profession we merely echo the Word of God. Our confession that we belong to Jesus Christ, finds therefore its basis exclusively in God's Word. This profession is also a deed of obedience. We may profess this because we must profess it. Our boldness in this continually finds its origin and cause in the demand of the Word of God.

We could ask the question here about how those who have grown up outside the church must come to faith. For the baptized members of the church, the requirement is that they must accept by faith what God has said about them. However, that cannot apply to those who are not members of the church and must come to faith from the outside. One should not overlook the fact that there is an abnormal situation here. The reality that a very large part of the human race lives outside of the church, does not take away its abnormal nature. It is not according to the design that God had set at the beginning. At one point in that beginning, during the days of Adam and at the time of Noah, all were considered in the covenant. Moreover, many in the Christianized countries in the past generations belonged to it.

However, with respect to all who are at this time outside of the church, we consider that they have left the covenant. This is abnormal. There is no return in faith to God possible unless people are aware of the existent abnormal situation and confess their guilt in it. Then they would again accept the promises that apply to the church, and which they never should have abandoned. This is not speculation. Paul made it clear to the believing Gentiles that at an earlier time they were *separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world* (Eph.2:12). Christ in fact did not help until they first confessed that exclusion from the covenant of the promise. Thus, He came to the aid of the centurion only when he confessed that as a Gentile he did not deserve that Christ should come under his roof. In addition, Christ did not help the Canaanite woman until she confessed that the Gentiles like dogs did not deserve to eat from the children's table (Matt.8:8 and 15:27). In faith then, with shame, there is a return to the covenant of the promise.

Thus, in faithful obedience to, and with the authorization of God's Word we confess that we belong to Jesus Christ. In that Word alone faith always finds its definitive and final source. Experience can actually provide some support, but then it is the experience that is gained through faith in God's Word, and is recognized as such by that faith. Without faith, we experience something entirely different than that we belong to Jesus Christ. In addition, the fact that many around me also confess in the same way can provide some support, but my faith can never rest in the profession of others. Of course, it is true that when I by faith come to know the confession of the church, I have fellowship with it.

The principle or essence of the confession that I belong to Jesus Christ applies also to the second answer when it addresses the three things that are necessary. Also with this confession, there is but a repeating of God's Word and a faithful response to it.

If we did not maintain this principle we would immediately encounter the objection that faith seems to be exclusively defined as knowledge. After all, the catechism asks, *What do you need to **know** in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?* The reference here is to a believing, faithful, knowing that is submissive to the Word of God and consciously dependent on it. Moreover, it is a knowledge based on the authority of God's Word that has conquered us.

In addition, it is possible that with this second answer we will encounter yet another objection. It appears that we need to confess three characteristics. I have to be displeased with myself. This is one virtue. I must have faith in deliverance. That is another. Moreover, I must also know that I have a serious intention of living a grateful life. That is the concluding attribute. However, is it not true that we do not confess our own virtues but Jesus Christ? People who intend to make public profession of faith in the congregation often hesitate because of this obstacle. When they examine themselves, it seems to them that there is not much evidence of these qualities. We observe that this is the same misconception.

In our confession we echo and repeat God's Word. The Word of God tells us that we are completely sinful, and that we are being overpowered by that Word, so that we no longer can or want to contradict it. God's Word also teaches us that we must be displeased with ourselves; and thus we make confession of the Word of God that has conquered us. God's Word tells us also that there is redemption for us in Christ, and that sharing in that redemption is sealed to us by God. We could and would not accept it, but the Word became too strong for us and in faith we bowed our head and submitted. Moreover, the Word of God tells us that it is God Who makes us holy, and that He will accomplish something positive in our lives. We did not want to relinquish control from our own hands, but He taught us how. His demand contains a promise for us, that we must obey the command since we accept the promise; and having been conquered by God's Word we also yield in this third instance.

Thus, believing is to be won over by the Word of God and to be overcome by it. In devoted submission we echo God's Word and believe the most daring things, even this that we belong to Jesus Christ.

### ***Our Only Comfort***

This submission to God's Word remains of prime importance in all that is said in this Lord's Day.

When we confess our only comfort, we thereby express that without this comfort life is futile and death hopeless. Outside of the powerful presence of God's Word that statement can never be truthful. Without the Word of God, there is no true knowledge of the necessities for living or of the essentials in dying. There is undoubtedly a general awareness of need in the world, but we must not imagine that therefore this – that we belong to Jesus Christ – is the solution. What does communion with Christ do for the essentials of life the way the unbelieving world understands them? What do we get out of it, they say. This comfort does not in any way connect with the sense of the essential need, as this exists in the world.

With that, however, we do not deny that God cannot use the needs as we all know them – the blind alley into which life and the world appear to have stumbled – as a means in His hand. The truth that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven remains unshaken. The gospel of Christ is mainly a gospel for the poor. Thus, God must use those needs – that is, by His Word shine a suitable light on it and turn the burden of need into a feeling of guilt. Only then does God do something with that so that the comfort of communion with Christ may be applied. Without this victory by God's Word, the need of the world becomes an accusation against God and an indictment of Him.

In fact, without the reality that God's Word wins us over, nobody admits the absolute necessities of life. Whenever some opportunity in life passes us by, we dare not admit that life itself seems futile. Nevertheless, invariably we draw up new plans. For most failed lives, therefore, death overtakes them still as a disappointment. Even if someone, totally ruined, longs to die, he would yet view death as a relief. At that point, he still has the outcome in his own hands. Yet even then, his death would be a lie. However, for him such dying would not be without hope.

God's Word alone cuts off all our chances because it speaks to us about the curse that made life an ordeal and death a judgment. The Word also reveals that the curse did not allow a single way of escape. Suffering, ruin, and destruction became inescapable. In this way alone, Christ becomes the only "chance." Thus, when we confess that Jesus Christ is the only comfort in life and in death, we therein presume there is no comfort anywhere else. Jesus Christ is the only One, and He is also seen as the only One. If we still cling to something, we cannot see Jesus Christ. The light that is visible in Jesus Christ also means that all other lights are extinguished.

You may say that there is still a lot in life that comforts and even delights us. Especially in love and in its many expressions there is delight, encouragement, and great comfort. We might perhaps consider that some of life's problematics appear to be relieved by it. Yet even this comfort is taken away from us by God's Word, for there is a curse in all relationships that are outside of Christ. For they are the relationships of which Christ says: *If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be My disciple* (Luke 14:26). The reality is that in such love outside of Christ people experience the curse. It does not serve for the healing of life, and instead there is deterioration of it in spite of that love. In reality, there is even a deterioration of that love itself. The root of life is not being healed by such love.

What the Word of God reveals and discovers for us is the curse with respect to life and in it the irrevocable nature of its distressful need. Behind the curse man's guilt functions. The misery of life in the light of God's Word becomes for us guilt, and God can take hold of that misery to show us our guilt. A person can harden himself in that distress, and accuse God. However, through the need God is also able to break us down and crush our spirit. We must keep in mind that it was not the distress that broke us down, but it was God through the distress. The need itself does not drive us to God, but God can use the burdens of life. Thus, the general awareness of the need itself is not a point of contact for grace, but God uses it to take hold of us. He does this by making us see the misery of life as guilt.

This is necessary, since otherwise the sense of need might have immersed us in self-pity. For it seems that at times, people have a violent reaction to the misery of life, while at other times there is a disabling self-pity. The one as well as the other defeats and frustrates life. God cuts through this with His Word, and makes us see the misery as guilt: what have we made of His world and of the life that was His? It is then that the world's misery comes to us in a different sense.

For then alone can we see Christ, or rather, then we have already seen Christ. At that point, we see that there is truly a connection between Christ and the need, even as it is illumined by God's Word. Christ can only be revealed as He is presented to us in this Lord's Day, namely as the One *Who has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil*. What are we to make of this, if we have not seen the misery as guilt? Undoubtedly much more can be said about the grace of God in Christ for life than is said here. However, this is the central point, and we cannot conceive of Christ in any way, unless we receive Him as He is presented here.

That presumes however that we understand that by our sins we have sold out our life, and see ourselves as under the dominion of Satan. That means that our life is meaningless and futile. It is through this power of Satan that life is subjected to vanity, no matter how beautiful and how rich it may appear to be at times. Life serves no real purpose then, for everything that belongs to Satan is meaningless. Even as his own existence is senseless – he is against himself – thus he has also imprinted a stamp of senselessness on all of life. The meaning of life, after all, is found in our response to God's love, to be in fellowship with God! It is for this purpose, namely that we grow in fellowship with God and give Him a response to His love, that we live on earth. If that is removed from life it becomes senseless, whatever the appearance of its outcome may be. If there is no particular burden in life for us, our living must still discover it to us. And how shall we understand the meaninglessness of life except through the Word of God, which enables us to discover the meaning of life?

### ***Restoration of Life***

That Christ and my belonging to Him is the only comfort in life and death, however, does not mean that this life remains the same life it was under the dominion of sin and Satan. Nor does it mean that I must place something else over against it to which I flee from the emptiness of life. The comfort that is in Christ does not exist next to, outside of, or above our life, but has penetrated into that life, even as Christ has entered into this life.

If this life had not been reclaimed, and I had to place all my hope entirely on the future, I really would not have been redeemed. For I am who I am, and as I am in this life; and I cannot abstract myself from it. This life is also my soul: what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his soul, which is his life? What does it help a person if he gains the whole world and yet his life continues to be vain, as his pursuit in this time remains senseless and bears no fruit? Thus Christ asks: *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul* (Mark.8:36)? In His Word God has promised us the restoration of this life. If someone wants to keep this life for himself, he will lose it, and his life will be meaningless. However, if someone is willing to lose his life, offering it to God to find Him therein, he will keep his life, and his life will be meaningful, as Jesus said: *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it* (Matt.16:25).

The Scriptures direct us strongly to this present life. It is true that the meaning of this life, if it really is to have meaning, must be an eternal one. The sense of this temporal life is preserved in eternity. *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men* (1Cor.15:19), for we would have comforted ourselves with a contentment that proves to be no satisfaction at all. Then the meaninglessness of life would be clearly illustrated to us. The meaning of this life therefore must be an eternal one. That however does not take away the fact that it is the intent of this life already.

What gives meaning to this life is Christ – the love of God revealed and given in Him. What gives meaning to this life is Christ, as the Word that became flesh. Already before the fall into sin, He gave meaning to life as the eternal Word. In that Word, which was in the beginning, was life – that is, the true life of fellowship with God; and *that life is the light of men* (John 1:4). That Word which gave God's fellowship to men, gave sense and meaning to life, and He, the eternal Word, enabled men also to understand the meaning of life, and thus let the light shine in life. Through the break with and separation from God the significance and the knowledge of the essence of life is gone. It has pleased God however, that

Christ as the Word that became flesh would again give meaning to life and reveal that meaning to us. The fullness of God's love is in Christ and in association with it life again gains its full realization. Thus, the solution of the life's oppressive burden is in this, that I belong to Jesus Christ: that He is mine and I am His.

Later we will see that this relationship is possible only because He bought us with His blood. This connection and association exists, however, because of the will of God, Who has given Christ to us and through the Holy Spirit incorporated us into Christ. In that relationship Christ actively gives our life meaning by making God's love flow to us, opening our hearts for it and making our love respond to His love. Therefore – and it is the only remedy – all possibilities that were dead, are made alive again in our hearts and now become realities. Our life, in which all opportunity was cut off by sin, regains its full potential again – and it is more than a chance! – since there is the promise as well as the fulfillment of that promise. Thus Christ is working in us, bringing to life all that was dead.

None of that happens all at once. It is difficult for us to learn that Christ and the love of God in Him is our only “chance.” We attempt to solve life's difficulties first by a variety of other means. There is often a lot of bitter experience in our life before Christ is the only One who remains. Nevertheless, there is also the blessed and joyful experience: Christ makes and keeps our hearts alive, and opens up the entire breadth of life, enabling us to understand it! He gives meaning to every day so that God's love fills it. Only love can accomplish that. We have already in general discussed that love alone can open up life for us and us to life. Without love, life is closed to us from whatever angle we may approach it. Through love however, you can see and hear the springtime of life. Someone must belong to us and we to someone, for then we have gained in that both life and the world. However, it is also possible that what happened had no foundation in God's love. In that case, something opens up for us for a while, yet what came to life initially, dies away again. God's love in Jesus Christ in contrast, opens for us eternally – and opens up for us in this life an eternal world.

We experience all this from God's love in Christ. However, we should place the emphasis on the fact that this also is an experience of *faith*. However, there remains so much of the healing power of Christ's love that we believe and yet do not see. Is our life indeed healed by it? Is that love truly a conquering power within us? From where then does the deadening, numbing power of sin and egoism in us come? God's love gives itself to us in this that we as it were lose ourselves in Him. Yet there are still so many deterring and inhibiting factors. But by faith we cling to the reality that God's love conquers, even more than we are able to see this.

Nevertheless, we often face this strange phenomenon: that while our heart is being opened and enlivened, the possibilities to respond are being cut off for us. Possibly the fear could oppress you whether your heart will continue to be alive, or whether you may wither and die. At times, it appears that it cannot be any other way. For you the meaning of life did not immediately become an open book in the relationship with Christ, and it did not forthwith become a demonstrable resolution of the oppressing needs of life. Also in this respect we walk mainly by faith and not by sight, for in this matter as well faith retains its “nevertheless.” We do believe the purpose and meaning of this life, and that it is by faith alone that we cling to Christ.

Then we are truly comforted. We are comforted in life and in suffering. We are able to live and we are able to suffer, because in it all we look for meaning in the love of Christ. Moreover, we are able to die, for therein the meaning will be fully revealed to us. It is entirely impossible that someone outside of Christ should say, “Know how to live, and dare to die!” After all, who is able to live and who is prepared to die? Life is like a maze and death a mystery. It is the love of Christ that sheds light on this.

### ***The Dominion of the Lamb***

This relationship with Jesus Christ is possible because *He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil.* Our fellowship with Him exists in God's will according to His eternal decision and sovereign good pleasure to grant us His love again. However, we may not and must not lose sight, even for a moment, of the manner in which God came to us: by way of the cross of Christ.

The church rightly has rejected the idea that Christ should have paid the price of His blood to Satan in order to rescue us out of his hands. It is however accurate to say, that according to the God's Word, God in His justice – that is in accordance with the rightful claim of His rejected and despised love – has delivered us into Satan's hands. Thus, Christ has paid God for His justice with the price of His blood.

However, we point out in connection with this, that we were placed in Satan's hands according to God's justice. What power could Satan possibly exercise over us, except the power of God's justice? For of himself Satan is nothing and has no power of his own. However, what subdues and condemns us is God's justice, for which and in which Satan is but an instrument. Even the leaders of this world have no power to destroy, for their authority has been granted to them exclusively in God's justice. Either we are in the hands of men or in Satan's hands, but behind this lies the fact that we are in the hands of God, Who has conferred this power on creatures because the just claim of His love was affronted by us.

With this, however, it should be clear that the solution to the world's problem and to life itself is found in atonement. And it is the only solution. Of what use are all the efforts of men to escape the yoke? There is no escape. Indulging in sin does not set us free from all restraints; living in harmony with nature provides no deliverance; idealism does not raise itself above the misery, for idealism is a dream. Behind every effort of deliverance looms the satisfaction of God's offended love. If God does not receive what we owe Him, how can the world exist? Christ has undertaken to give to God His own life, His blood, His soul, His love, when God had turned Himself away from Him because of us. Through the blood of Christ alone, the world can exist.

Thus, when satisfaction is made to the justice of God's love, it must follow that Satan's power to destroy has been taken away from him. He still exercises his power, but that can never be a force to destroy what belongs to God. Satan in the use of his power is an instrument in the hands of God – an instrument that He retains. The authority is taken away from Satan, for he no longer controls the outcome. This also is a matter of faith. Seeing the destruction of the world, we are often inclined to ask whether Christ has suffered in vain, and has shed His blood for naught. Satan still destroys so much in our lives! Nevertheless, we maintain that there was and continues to be atonement.

Thus, it is an immense comfort for us, that we have been taken from Satan's hands and placed into the hands of Christ, and that such is the power of God's love. In the book of Revelation is the vision of the adoration of the Lamb *looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne of God* (Rev.5:6). Thus, there is now the dominion of a love that gave itself even unto death. If such love was able to do that at one point, it must also now have the victory.

For what Christ has bought with such an enormous price – His precious blood, His exceedingly precious blood – He will never let go from His hands. What He has bought with His death, He now defends with His life. *For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!* (Rom.5:10).

### ***The Work of the Triune God***

We can never focus merely on Christ, because Christ is for us nothing if not the revelation and the gift of God's love. We belong to Christ, but Christ is of God. It is foolish to insist on seeing a certain contradiction between christocentric and theocentric. Only in Christ – in the love revealed in Him – can God occupy the centre of our lives. *Nobody has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, Who is at the Father's side, has made Him known* (John 1:18). Christ reveals Himself to us as the Son and the eternal Word of God; Who else do we have in Christ? Christ also reveals the Father to us, and enables us to understand the work of the Spirit. That is why the catechism goes from Christ to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, the very Trinity of God becomes known to us only in Christ. We know the Father only as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit only as the Spirit of Christ. Outside of Jesus Christ the revelation of the Trinity remains somewhat of an abstraction, and only in Christ is the Triune God also the living God.

In this way, we proceed here from Christ to the Father. Christ *also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.* The catechism phrases it here in such a way, that we are led from Christ back to the will of the Father. Through the will of the Father Christ has become for us, what in fact He is for us. Christ has gone out from God. In Christ as the eternal Word, God has fully expressed how He intends to interact with man. And *from the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another* (John 1:16). With everything in Christ, we deal with the will of the Father's love. Through that will, we are included in Christ.

Without the Father's will – that is, without the will of His love – *not a hair can fall from my head.* What is really confessed here is that all the insignificant, incidental, purposeless things in life are full of meaning. In these the will of the Father's love is present. All those seemingly meaningless and incidental happenings are part of the plan that God has for our life, and they serve to enhance our fellowship with Him.

According to the will of the Father, *all things must work together for my salvation.* So many things seem to cut off the opportunities in my life. Yet all this "impossibility" has brought the one great "possibility" of God's grace closer to me; and all those impossibilities have made possible the realization of fellowship with God. However, most of the time we do not see this, for this also is a matter of faith. There appear to be so many contradictions in life. And it involves a bitter struggle to hold on to the fact that what is NO for us is YES with God. In it all, we have confidence because of our faith in Him, Who for Christ's sake is our Father. What might seem purposeless, impossible, loveless, and without grace in life, looks different when viewed by faith.

From Christ we are pointed to the Holy Spirit. *Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.* That is related to what preceded: we have confidence that all things will work together for our salvation through the Holy Spirit, Who creates that confidence. The Holy Spirit comes here as the One who produces faith by which we are assured of eternal life.

We must believe, for faith is also a **demand** of God. This faith comes to expression through God's Word and through the leading of the Holy Spirit. When we have come to faith, Christ teaches us however to see this as the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a miracle that we, who have such an unruly and rebellious nature, are able to believe. The Holy Spirit has opened our heart for the Word by means of a miracle, and in that way has made us to understand God's eternal love through the Word. In fellowship with God's eternal love in Christ we have eternal life; and because it is eternal love, we are assured of eternal life.

Through the wonder of the Holy Spirit, we are also made *wholeheartedly willing and ready to live for God.* Faith works in love. And there is a particular purpose in our life for God: for in it we come ever closer to God as well as to the fullness of His grace. As we are able to give ourselves to Him, we are increasingly filled with His love, and come to see the meaning and purpose of our life. Thus, we are confirmed in the comfort we have in Christ.

### ***Three Things in One***

In this first Lord's Day we confess matters about ourselves. In the first answer we confess that we belong to Jesus Christ, and in the second answer we confess in the first person *how great our sins and misery are, how we are delivered from all our sins and misery, and how we are to be thankful to God for such deliverance.* In the entire catechism with its divisions of Our Sin and Misery, Our Deliverance, and Our Thankfulness, we confess things concerning ourselves.

However, our confession – if it is true and genuine – is in the first place a confession about God. After all, it is a professing by faith, and faith by its very nature always first focuses on God. If we were to accuse the catechism that throughout it speaks about man, we would be forgetting that in the catechism we have to do with the confession of the church, and that the church in it worshipfully professes God. The church can never do any other but profess God. Man in the catechism, however, is viewed in the light of God's revelation, for it alone sheds true light on man. Not only is God's Name repeatedly confessed in the catechism, but also that confession is the background of all that is said about man. Whoever overlooks that, misuses the catechism and places one difficulty on top of another in seeking to understand it.

Such misuse becomes especially clear in the consideration of the three things as these are described in the second answer. Some have seen those three parts as virtues in the believer. While they then confirm that man himself could not bring forth faith in God's redemption nor in the desire to serve Him, nevertheless their attention is focused and concentrated on the first part: if only I rightly know my sins and misery – that is sufficient! They forget, or at least keep silent about the fact that such knowledge of sin is also a gift from God. Thus, in concentrating all divisions in the first one, they actually accommodated man's sinful inclination. This knowledge of misery and that displeasure with ourselves appears to be something we are able to produce on our own, they contend. Yet, they have missed the very purpose, for true displeasure with ourselves includes also the acknowledgement that we of ourselves cannot truly be displeased with ourselves; for on the contrary, we are pleased with ourselves and love our depravity.

What we need to confess about ourselves is the result of the insight God gave us through His illumination. Knowledge of ourselves is dependent on our knowledge of God. Calvin has no answer for the question he poses in the first chapter of his *Institutes*, about what comes first: the knowledge of God or the knowledge of ourselves. There really is no earlier or later in time for either, for they are both present, or both are not present. This is related to the fact that we know God only in His covenant; that is, in His relationship with us, and in it we know God and ourselves at the same time. Only logically can we discern that knowledge of self is dependent on knowledge of God.

When God becomes known to us as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ by His Word, God's light illumines our lives. Then with one glance we see the shamefulness of our unfaithfulness with respect to His salvation in Christ and the seriousness of His call. At the same time there is something in God's revelation that frightens us and drives us away, while it also draws us and holds on to us. We have an urgency to be with God, even if the path leads through fire. Then I know as much of one of the three parts, as I know of the others. There is no knowledge of sin without the knowledge of deliverance, and there is no knowledge of redemption without the knowledge of sanctification.

And the whole of that knowledge is redemptive. It is as redeeming when the humiliating light of God's love shines on our sins and calls us to a consciousness of guilt, as when the redemption in God's Word is illumined by the cross; and the one is not there without the other. That is true also of the third part. Thus, there are in the catechism in a certain sense three parts of the deliverance, for all three speak to us of God's revelation in Christ, which that revelation then awakens in us. Thus we cannot say that we know and confess our sins, but that we do not dare to receive the redemption in Christ. For only when our sins appear in the light of God's grace and love have they truly become guilt for us, but then they are also conquered by that grace for Christ's sake, and thus there arises a new man in us.

Thus, considered as the three parts of redemption, they articulate the only comfort we have in this, namely that we belong to Jesus Christ and they are integrally part of it. Through the insight of the revelation that God gives of Himself in Christ, we constantly learn to understand more of this. The question is, *What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?* [Translator's note: the author's version of the question is, "How many things (*stukken*, in Dutch) must you know to live and die happily in that comfort?"] That does not mean that you first have to know the three things, and after that you have the possibility to learn to know the only comfort. The only comfort encompasses these three things. When I belong to Jesus Christ through faith, it means that I know these three parts.

In addition, we must also think here of organic growth. However much the bond of faith in Jesus Christ may still be in the beginning stage of development, from its very inception it includes the three things, even if only in embryo. Through the work of the Holy Spirit they develop increasingly, while the instruction of the church's confessions is also helpful in this.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 2****3. From where do you know your sins and misery?***From the law of God.***4. What does the God's law require of us?***Christ teaches us this in a summary in Matthew 22.**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.**This is the great and first commandment.**And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.***5. Can you keep all this perfectly?***No. I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbor.****The 'Faith Knowledge' of our Misery***

As was evident from the final observation of the first Lord's Day, we are dealing with the knowledge of the three parts of the catechism from the perspective of faith. Thus, the knowledge of misery as treated in the first division of the catechism is a knowing by faith or as we might also call it: a faith knowledge. We come to know this in the relationship of faith in Jesus Christ, and without that relationship it does not exist.

With that we are assured that there is no knowledge of misery, in the sense that it is meant here, without the knowledge of redemption. Faith focuses on the whole of God's Word and can never accept one aspect of the truth of God without the other. We can never submit in faith to the judgment of God without that same faith taking hold of the gospel of redemption. God's Word and faith are certainly distinct, but faith from its very beginning embraces God's entire revelation in its various dimensions, even if it is only in embryo. Therefore, the catechism cannot possibly address the matter of our misery except in terms of the knowledge of faith. Without faith, there is no authentic knowledge of misery. Thus, since an act of believing is one single act, faith bows before the whole Word of God with its entire content.

It is obvious that the catechism addresses here only the knowledge about our misery from the point of view of faith. Outside of faith, which always immediately embraces deliverance, there is no acceptance of the judgment of sin as guilt. This is illustrated peculiarly by the words of Cain after he had heard God's judgment. He says: *My punishment is more than I can bear* (Gen. 4: 13). By "punishment", he does not think of anything else but the penalty. There is in these words a protest against the severity of the punishment that God has given him: *You will be a restless wanderer on the earth* (Gen.4:12). From this protest it is clear that he does not see his sin as guilt before God even though he may speak in a certain sense of guilt; it is also clear that he does not submit to the judgment. Such submission is always a deed of faith, which at the same time accepts redemption. If God had not revealed deliverance as well, from man's side there would never have been agreement with or approval of God's sentence. Then there would only have been heard a protest against the punishment, and an attempt to escape the judgment or seek a reduction in the penalty as Cain sought to do. Sinful flesh always relates to the judgment in this way.

The foregoing indicates that the preaching of the law alone will never result in the conviction of sin. Law and gospel working together produce the knowledge of faith concerning our misery. Without the gospel one can indeed be frightened of the majesty of God, but it is a fear of Him Whom they see as an enemy and from Whom they seek to escape. From this there will never come the knowledge of misery and a being crushed by a guilt that produces liberty.

Without the gospel there can never be a redeeming knowledge of misery such as is meant here – no knowledge by which we come to God in genuine repentance and confession of guilt. That does not mean, however, that such fear of God’s judgment motivating a person to flee from Him has no meaning at all. Yet in the true sense of the word that fear is not preparatory for the true knowledge of our misery, and it is not a point of contact for God’s redeeming work in us. Nevertheless, God is able to use that fear and transform it so that it becomes a means in His hand to overwhelm us. Then it is however an intervening deed of His grace and that conversion happens when with the preaching of the law also that of the gospel comes to us.

It is therefore erroneous to designate the first part of the catechism as the section of the law, the second as the one of the gospel and the third division as again that of the law. This is not the place to comment on the relation between law and gospel, but it is necessary to note that not any redeeming work ever comes to us except this happens through the whole Word of God, including law and gospel. In this first part, therefore, the law comes in its connection with the gospel. Whoever would forget that would never do justice to this first section.

Thus, we may not consider the knowledge of the law and the knowledge of sin as brought about exclusively by the preaching of the law as preparation for faith – a faith that subsequently would be generated only by the preaching of the gospel. Much too often matters have been stated in this way. The result was then that a person was never spiritually finished with the first part, and remained mired in the knowledge of misery.

Others have attempted to escape it with the unnatural, artificial explanation that they had groaned and suffered long enough in their misery, and it was time now that they should be able to accept redemption. Thus their knowledge of sin, which they considered adequate, was made the foundation on which they believed they were able to build faith. Neither their so-called knowledge of misery, nor their so-called knowledge of redemption had then anything to do with the knowledge through faith, for faith builds on nothing other than the Word of God. The preaching of the law without the proclamation of the gospel can never bring forth anything other than a legalistic life, which is a life that is burdened under the law, but really continues to see it as an enemy. In that way they can never come to a repentant acknowledgment of the justice of the law, which is the law of God’s love.

In reaction to this legalistic life, sectarianism in its many manifestations developed into a one-sided “evangelical” life in several of the more narrow church circles. (There is also a legalistic sectarianism – an example of this is Seventh Day Adventism.) Also in the church one finds this one-sided “evangelical” movement. In such a movement, they have in Christ definitively settled with the law. The same basic *motif* reveals itself here also, namely that they separate law and gospel, and even consider them as opposed to each other. They cannot see the law other than an enemy, for they cannot accept its interconnection with the gospel as the law of God’s love. For our “evangelical” movements it remains a riddle how the law can be read in the church every Sunday morning. In Christ, they have left the law behind them for good.

What this movement denies in particular is the continuing use of the law as a source of the knowledge of sin. They are afraid that thereby they will be bound again legally. This movement considers that in catechism preaching to return every year to the part of misery is an absurdity. They have already experienced the knowledge of misery and the agony of it once in Christ, and now do not want to know anything but joy in Him.

From the side of the church it may not be denied that the life of faith constantly must be a life of exalting God’s grace. Such praise can never be merely by itself however. During our time in this body of death, there is simultaneously a sighing under the misery and the judgment of the law about it, as well as a glorying in the liberation through Christ. Paul complains about that judgment of the law in his expression: *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin* (Rom.7:14). Whenever there is not a constant remaining under the judgment of the law, the confession of

deliverance is hollowed out and maintained through nothing other than the constant excitement of the emotions. It is then also possible that one could actually develop a certain satisfaction in one's own faith, a contentment that they could easily but mistakenly view as joy in Christ.

When members of the church live out of the covenant of the Lord, this must not produce the above-mentioned "evangelical" influence. It is possible that a person could imagine that covenant life permanently sets us free from the knowledge of the misery under the judgment of the law. In such a life, one may even be prepared to allow that our daily sins interfere in the fellowship with the covenant God, but the curse of the law in such a perception really remains out of consideration. One thing is forgotten in this, namely that with each sin we make ourselves unworthy of God's covenant. Moreover, through every sin and the forgiveness of it we are brought back to our disregard of God's grace as background of His covenant. If we do not repeatedly enter into this, and thus if we do not under the threat of the law constantly consider sin as worthy of eternal death, our communion with God becomes superficial. Just as the Jews did not see the background of God's grace in the covenant, and therefore could not live out of God's covenant in a true sense, our life also in the same way would lose all depth.

The confession of the misery in the revelation of the law constantly remains necessary, even when we understand that the right knowledge of our misery is possible only through faith, which is generated by the preaching of the law and the gospel. Confessing the first part of the catechism without the second one seems to us impossible, and likewise the second section without the first.

### ***The Law of the Covenant***

The law as it is confessed here is the law of the LORD, the God of the covenant. The preface of the law states, *I am the LORD your God*, and in the summary of the law we read, *You shall love the LORD your God*. The law is the covenant law. In order to understand the significance of the law, also as the source of the knowledge of sin for our life, it is therefore necessary to consider briefly several chapters from the history of the law.

It is striking that those who believe that they are forever finished with the law because of Christ, wish to refer to it exclusively as "the book of the law." Indeed, Scripture states: *Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law* (Deut.27:26 cf. Gal.3:10). In that book of the law a particular function of the law is focused on, and in it the summary or essence of the law is articulated in a few sentences, as this determines the entire relationship of God to His creation. Yet the law also comes to us in all of creation, and as such in a much broader context than has been set forth in the Ten Commandments. Even now, all that God has created speaks to us of God's law, and its power becomes clear when we consider the history of the law.

When we think of man before the fall into sin and of his knowledge of the law we are used to speak of a created or innate law. With that "innate law," we do not only think of having an aptitude or disposition for God's will – of an "automatic" doing what it requires – but also of a knowing the law and a conscious obedience to its norm. In a strict sense of the word, there is neither an innate law nor an innate knowledge of God. Just as it is with all knowledge of God, the knowledge of the law is also the result of revelation. Thus when in the new covenant God according to His promise writes His law on our hearts, then this does not take place immediately but through the proclamation of His Word.

Adam received a broad knowledge of the law through God's revelation of the works of His hands, and through his observation of that. He saw how God had placed all things under the law, and that his own life also was not exempt from the law. His own relationship with all things created was subject to the law. He saw the harmony, the inter-dependency, and the interrelatedness of all creatures. From this the knowledge of the law of love must proceed for him of its own accord, since clearly this harmony could only be preserved by love.

Thus, Adam came to understand the law of love that controlled his relationship to all creation. That knowledge was not literally innate in him. Only his aptitude in relating to all creation, and with it also the ability to understand the law of love was given him at his creation. Along with his natural disposition toward all creatures, he must also have been given a special rapport with and affinity for God Who had created them, and the expectation of the law of love for God must

therefore have come up in him. Through that alone, however, he did not come to a clear knowledge of that law. God first needed to tell him Who He wished to be for him, and what He intended for him, and how he must love Him. All of that first became evident only when God spoke through His promise and through His call. When God gives His fellowship to Adam in His covenant that initially was established by His Word, and in it opens the wellspring of His love for him, Adam learns to understand the law of love more fully.

He must learn and discover the love of God, and come to know that his own love is to be a response to God's love. Moreover, by answering in love, he would grow in God's love. In this way there is the covenant of love, and the law of love is the law of the covenant. Through this revelation of the law of fellowship with God in His covenant, the law of love that controlled his relation to all creation was confirmed for Adam. Thus, the law of love became for him based upon and founded in the covenant.

A two-fold function in the covenant came to fulfill the law for Adam. On the one hand, he saw himself and all creation subject to the law, while God as the Lawgiver remained above the law, and thus he saw in the law God's majesty and His eminence above him. On the other hand, that law was the law of fellowship between God and him, and the more he obeyed it the more God gave Himself to Adam. In this way, the law also became a means of fellowship and it bound the two parties in the covenant; parties who nevertheless were so distinctly different from each other.

Already before the fall, therefore, the law was the law of the covenant. Already then, promise and demand were not separated from each other. Man came to know the meaning and intent of the demand, and learned to obey that demand through the promise, because in the promise God gave Himself to him. This is valuable for the determination of the later relationship between gospel and law.

Scripture reveals that after the fall into sin not all knowledge of the law, and not all obedience to it was lost. Thus we read: *When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them* (Rom.2:14,15). The revelation of the law in all creation continued to come to them, even while they did not have the Word revelation. Through that revelation in all of creation, the demands of the law continued to be written on their hearts. Also then, that writing on their hearts of the requirements of the law continued to take place mediately, that is through means.

Take note however of the wording of Scripture! It does not say that Gentiles know the law, or that they observe the law. The Gentiles do by nature *the things required by the law*, and they reveal *the requirements of the law* written on their hearts. Doing the requirements by the law is not yet: obeying the law. Here and there among the Gentiles are works, which as far as the external side is concerned, conform to the law. However, the norm of love – as this is an all-determining norm in the entire law – they do not obey. It would be difficult to say that Gentiles fulfill the law, for that is impossible given the unity of the law. *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it* (James 2:10). Only when the Holy Spirit has opened our heart and we by faith learn to listen to the demands of the law as these come to us through God's Word, is there in principle obedience to the distinct love-norm of the law. We could also not maintain that the law is written on the hearts of the Gentiles, although it does say this about *the requirements of the law*. Thus, there is a certain conformity with a few norms, which they learned from general revelation.

All of this could hardly be different. We have just mentioned that the law of love, which Adam knew to a certain degree from creation, was grounded in God's covenant. Moreover, in concept the covenant existed before all creation. God did indeed establish the covenant with Adam initially when all creatures as well as Adam were created, but all that came into being was created to be included in the covenant. In this way, God's covenant is the foundation for every relationship between God and Adam, and between Adam and all creation. When the covenant was broken, and outside of the covenant of grace only a few fragments of the knowledge of the law and some external obedience are evident, it is clear that there is no knowledge of the law and no obedience to that law in its unity or as a whole.

Moreover, also of those fragments of knowledge and obedience of the Gentiles, we need to say that they are a consequence of the covenant of grace that God established in Christ. While the Gentiles do not know Christ, the revealing of the law by

all of creation to them is also a work of Christ. In Proverbs 8 and 9 we read that Wisdom calls out and Understanding raises her voice. *On the heights along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gates leading into the city, at the entrance she cries out aloud* (Prov.8:2). Wisdom according to these chapters is the revelation of the God of the covenant, the LORD; she is the Christ, Who calls out in the busiest bustle of life. He calls forth the law in life itself with all its relationships; He calls out for justice and for the acceptance of discipline.

We must not forget that this is said to Israel in the venue of the covenant, where also God's special revelation was heard. Yet, the passage does not speak of a Word revelation through the Christ, but of His call in life itself. In this way there is a calling of Christ among the Gentiles in their life – in their associations and interactions. After all, *their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them ... so that they are without excuse* (Rom.2:15, Rom.1:20).

In the covenant of grace with the special revelation given us, the law was established in its essence for us in the Ten Commandments, and its summary explains it as the law of love. That does not mean, however, that also in that realm of the covenant the law does not continue to call out even to the people of the covenant through all of creation and through life itself. In fact, Christ does proclaim the law to them through life itself.

With that, we should not forget that God gave the law on mount Sinai in an essentially negative form – in the way of what was forbidden. That was connected with the Old Testament covenant format and the life “of servitude”. It was still the time that God was actively revealing sin and guilt in order that the cross of Christ would be revealed as the indispensable assumption of the covenant of grace. In addition, the church was placed under guardians and caregivers, since she was yet in her formative years at that time. Therefore, the law of the Lord needed to be explicated more fully in the ceremonial and civil laws. We may not say that in addition to the Ten Commandments God gave Israel two other laws. The ceremonial and civil laws mean nothing other than the outworking of the law of the Ten Commandments as these applied at that time. Also in this respect, the law is one. In connection with that punitive and sin-discovering character of the law we may now especially speak of “the book of the law,” wherein we come to know the curse of which it could be said: *Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law* (Gal.3:10). Even of the Old Testament time, we may not say that this was the only revelation of the law.

With the beginning of the New Testament, the law comes to us principally in a different form, even if in essentials it remains expressed in the words of those Ten Commandments. The law as it was worked out for Israel, taught the curse which was on all of life. That was the reason for the negative format of the law, and the reason for commandments about impurity, washings, fasting, and forbidden food. Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit all of creation is again sanctified unto the Lord, because it was given to men in the service of God. Now the law comes to us in this positive way, so that we in using the world should sanctify it in love to the Lord. Also therefore, in its positive expression the law is the source of the knowledge of sin for us. We must thus pay attention to the fact that the catechism in its second answer of this Lord's Day presents the law in its positive form as the demand of love, and in this way reveals it as the source of the knowledge of sin. Thus also in this positive format it is understood basically from the Ten Words.

Through the illumination of those Ten Words however, it becomes especially clear in the New Testament that the law also comes to believers from all of creation and from life itself. Thus, it meets us in everything – in every transaction, by every word and thought, and with every breath we take. We encounter it embedded in every relationship of life, seeking dominance in all of them. The law is sketched for us in ever so many particulars, and shows its vigilance in every deed by the sensitivity of our consciences.

From our earliest years our parents sought to instill in us a sense of the law when they taught us that some things were commanded and others forbidden. However, even before our parents spoke one word to us about that, we had acquired a notion of it from the world around us. We experienced our whole life from earliest youth as consisting of a norm that places obligations upon us, and every one of us knows about the guilt we have when we do not meet them. Through the Word of God, we come to know that law as God's law of the covenant, and we learn to accept it as such in life. After that, we need to deal not merely with “the book of the law,” but with the love-command as this confronts us in all of life.

As requirement to dedicate and sanctify our entire life in love to the Lord, the law must be for us the source of sin as well as the guide for gratitude. It enfolds our whole life in its judgment, but also in its uplifting power. However, we are still so far removed from a total and complete sanctification of life! And yet within the law as it comes to us in the covenant there is also a promise.

### ***The Law of God's Love***

We need to enter more fully yet into the idea that the law is the law of the covenant, since that is also decisive for the knowledge of sin. Everyone has at least some notion of the law when in certain actions one's conscience bothers him. Yet, what meaning does this twinge of conscience have for the true knowledge of sin, as it is meant here? Again, we cannot draw a straight line from one to the other, when the accusation of the conscience does not, of its own accord, bring us to God with *a broken spirit... and a contrite heart* (Ps.51:17). Of course, God can use His Spirit and through the accusation of the conscience take hold of us, and by the power of His grace make us feel guilty before Him. However, that is an intervening deed of His grace, which happens when God makes us see the law as the law of the covenant. Then we see sin as the breaking of the covenant of faithfulness. Yet, how long can we at times walk around with an accusing conscience before we are crushed and broken by God! Nevertheless, we must come to that, because in God's covenant we see the law of love as an expression of God's own love, and as a means by which He intends to normalize our relationship with Him.

The law of the so-called covenant of works was not the rule *do this and you shall live* (Luke 10:28) in the sense of "obey this commandment and in doing so you will earn eternal life." In the covenant of God, also in the so-called covenant of works, there is never a mention of earning and wages. In His covenant, God is always the first who gives His love. Through His love He teaches us to love, and our love is never anything other than a response to His love. Through the law, He has again regulated our love relationship with Him, as this relationship does not have a norm in itself but God Himself has established a norm for it. Moreover, it is true that in obedience to that norm we grow in the fellowship of God's love. In this way the law is the 'covenant-law.' Instead of speaking about the "covenant of works," it would be better to designate it the "covenant of God's favor."

The commandment *do this and you shall live*, applies to the person who has left the covenant. For him there could never be a different rule than that by fulfilling the law he again would work himself up and into the covenant, which is entirely impossible. The old covenant was actually a covenant of grace yet came in a legal formulation, because in it and by it the conviction of the curse and the need for the cross of Christ would be created. Moreover, that regulation needed to come to Israel to convince them of their own impossibility of fulfilling its requirements. It was not until Christ, Who for our sake was put under the curse and outside of the covenant and forsaken by God, that such regulation came to its full significance. He fulfilled the covenant of God by being obedient until death, and He atoned for all sinful deeds. He could do that because He was not only man, but also God.

Even to Israel the law came not exclusively in that form – it would only drive the people away from God in fear – the law was also the law of the covenant wherein God in His love again being first, gave Himself to His people. Notwithstanding its legal format, the covenant with Israel was also the covenant of grace. The relationship between God and Israel was two-fold: He gave Himself and held Himself back; He revealed Himself yet was hidden behind the veil. The law now comes to us as the law of the covenant. God gives Himself to us and intends to regulate the entire relationship with Him and with all that He has created by means of the demand to love. Only when we have seen the law in the light of God's own love, will it shame and shatter us. An entire life under God's Word, demonstrating to us God's love and the demand of that love, is necessary to bring us to that brokenness more and more, and even then it is still only in part. How ashamed we should therefore be of our irresponsible and unresponsive life! God's love and the demand of that love – the law as covenant law – must awaken in us and continuously prod us into that sense of responsibility.

When we see our love as a responding love, as answer to God's love for us, then the guideline and rule for our love will lie in God's love. The law as covenant law really cannot be anything but an actual expression of God's love. The law has been derived from God's love. This love-law is not an eternal norm that is above God and to which He must submit, nor is it arbitrary so that God could have commanded something else, but it finds its origin in God's love. Thus, the law is from, and through, and to God. This confession that the law is not above God nor arbitrary may not be considered as a

theological issue on which scholasticism has idly wasted its efforts, but even today it is of great value. This is contained in the confession of the law as law of the covenant.

We certainly may not see the law as an eternal norm above God. That would be a deification of the law and is found basically in all legalism. The law as covenant law is the norm of relations with God, and a life according to that law makes us grow in His fellowship. Then what is centrally involved in keeping the law is to be captured by His love. But then we live with a certain anxiety in our lifetime, meaning that we are afraid to do something against His law. Over against this, legalism does not have as its main purpose to live for God and in the fellowship of His love, but its aim is found in the law itself. The highest objective for legalism is to live in conformity with the law. This becomes a service but not for God. And since we can never serve any creature in true worship, not even the law, it always means an overpowering of the law, which is a misuse of it in order to enhance oneself. Legalism does not live out of and from God's love, but every legalist is sufficient unto himself. We can only answer God's love according to the law of the covenant.

A typical manifestation of legalism is found in pharisaism. This became evident especially in its attitude toward the command for the Sabbath. According to Christ's description, legalism maintained that man existed for the Sabbath. And with that, the service of the deified law comes to expression. The extent to which the law was misused may be seen from pharisaism, which boasted of their observance of the Sabbath. Over against that, Christ said: *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2:27), meaning that in the covenant law God blesses human life and in fellowship with Him according to that law, liberates the Sabbath.

Various forms of Puritanism also remind us of legalism. It is peculiar that also in some Puritan circles attention was concentrated on the command for the Sabbath. And thus here also obedience and service essentially were rendered to the law. Such legalism is not always defeated in church life, for as often as one seeks conformity with the law for the sake of the law itself, in the sense of being a servant to it, it becomes a binding force. Then there can never be simple agreement with the law, for one is only in full harmony with it when one uses it as the rule for fellowship in God's love, received by grace.

Moreover, the idea of the law as arbitrary is not readily overcome either. Some have thought that God's sovereignty could only be maintained when we accept the idea that God also could have commanded us something entirely different. Our minds are then closed for the fact that God's sovereignty is exalted exactly in this, that He in His love enables us to discover the norm for our fellowship with Him. For how could we ever come to greater submission to Him than that we may love Him in no other way than the way He loves us? However, if we should proceed from the idea that maintaining the sovereignty of God means that the law must be arbitrary, we would then need to draw the conclusion that one could never speak of a universally applicable law. According to this view, God would be bound by such a universally binding law, and thus He would no longer be sovereign. If then there were not a law that is binding everywhere, we would need to determine what the will of God was "in every existing situation." From what then would we determine the will of God, except from the situation itself, and from the love of our own heart? In other words, then the law exists in the thing itself and in our love. Then it is not the law, but instead the things and our love that we deify.

With this, we have truly arrived at idealism in its most objectionable form. We have then formed our ideals for various relationships, and from those ideals we deduce the law for our behavior. That means we are completely self-willed and self-empowered. We often see such behavior and attitudes, especially with respect to marital relations, but also in all relationships between people in their mutual activities, between people and their possessions, between groups of people, but also between nations! The idealism that deifies things and our love is a form of lawlessness. Of course, much lawlessness is absolved and glossed over with idealism! Through this idealism, we come to the proposition: Love is God, and we would never arrive at the expression of Scripture: *God is love* (1John 4:8). We come to this only by submission to His law of love.

## ***Faith is Assumed***

When the law is the law of the covenant, faith is presumed in its commandments. This surely can be seen in the preface of the law, *I am the LORD your God*. It is only by faith that He is known as our God. In the same manner the summary of the law states, *you shall love the LORD your God*. The fact is that no love for God is possible except when we know Him as our God, since we can love Him only in His love. When He is not made known to us in His love, we can only flee from Him. Only by faith is He revealed to us in His love. Thus in the requirement of the law faith is presumed. The law is the law of love, but behind its requirement is the demand to have faith.

However, that does not take away that God places the command to love Him before all people. But He also comes to all people with the demand to have faith. That pagans cannot come to faith because they do not have the Word revelation, is their fault. In the beginning God gave His Word to man, but the nations have despised this revelation. Thus, they all fall under the judgment of the law of love that presumes faith. But we cannot understand the claim of the law, unless we have known the love of God through faith. That love is now made known to us only in the cross of Christ, in being led out of our house of bondage. And only when we see something of that, can the demand of the law come to us. There is but one revelation of God's love that comes to us, holds on to us, and at the same time by the law of that love judges us. When we see God in the cross of Christ, we are bound to God for good, wish to be with Him, while at the same time we tremble at the judgment of His love. He draws us and He casts us off. In this way alone do we face the judgment of His law of love.

Thus also in this part of the misery nothing can happen to us outside of Christ, in Whom the revelation of God is centered. In His cross the gift of God's love is ours, but in His cross as nowhere else there is also a demonstration of the demand of the law of love and of the holiness of that demand. If indeed God has so loved us that He gave His own Son for us in this way, how holy and great must then be the demand of that love!

We mean to say with all of this that God is known to us only through faith, and that only by faith the claim of that love pervades our understanding. If there is doubt, there really cannot be a very deep sense of guilt. Faith and a feeling of guilt are present together, or they are both not present. We cannot speak of a love for God when there is no faith. Sometimes people want to speak of a certain love for God, while they deny faith. I do not know how I must love, when I do not believe in God. When I see Him by faith, He draws me and yet puts me in the judgment of His love; and thus I come to the turning point of the feeling of guilt.

Even as there is no knowledge of the law of love for God outside of faith, in the same way there is no knowledge of the law of love for the neighbor without faith. Only through faith do I come to know God and can understand the demand of love for Him. In this way also, through faith alone do I truly come to know my neighbor and understand the requirement of love for him in the right way. I do not see my neighbor properly except by faith. Paul speaks of a knowing according to the flesh, and then says: *from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view* (2 Cor.5:16). Knowing people according to the flesh, or in a worldly manner, means to see them only in the light of the natural ties of blood relations, friendship, natural love relations, group or business relations. We must die to those exclusively natural relations, for of these Christ says: *If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple* (Luke 14:26).

If there are only those natural ties, they compete with the love for Christ. Through the love for Christ we lose all and everything in order to receive everything back from His hands sanctified. Then we no longer have each other according to the flesh, but as God's gift. That exclusively natural love does not fulfill the second table of the law, for we can understand the second table only in the light of the first. We must love each other, also in those natural relationships, for God's sake. The natural must thus at the same time be the spiritual. It is in this way then that faith is presumed in the requirement to love our neighbor.

We cannot maintain that outside of faith all love is sheer self-love, even if in many instances this is the case. There is still much spontaneity in love without faith. We do not need to accept that Christ meant to portray the Good Samaritan as a believer. The spontaneity that is present in the love for the neighbor outside of faith, continues to be maintained by God's

mercy in Christ among people of the world. This spontaneous neighbor-love however is cut off from its root, namely the love for God through faith. Therefore egoism threatens to take it over. The priest and the Levite, who were egoistic in their relations to God, also showed this in their relation with their fellow men. It is peculiar that Christ in that parable does not speak about the neighbor of the priest, the Levite, or of the Samaritan, but the other way around. He asks about the neighbor of the one who was attacked: *Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?* (Luke 10: 36).

Through faith we no longer consider our life our own, for God has given us to others as neighbors and thus in our life we sacrifice for the neighbor for God's sake. In this way alone – through faith – can I see the person to whom I am obligated to give myself as neighbor. Then our eyes are opened wide for our neighbor, while without faith we frequently bypass him. Thus, also in the command of love for the neighbor faith is assumed.

### ***Love for God and for the Neighbor***

According to the law of the covenant, our love has its norm in God's love. God's love for us however is love for His own sake. Also in God's love for us He seeks Himself, even as in all things He reveals Himself. Thus, God's love for us is the norm of our love for Him. God's love for us does however include our salvation, and in this way God's love is indeed a norm for us. The law of the covenant does command us to have a certain self-love, yet God must always be first in the intent of our love.

With that love of God for Himself we must measure our love for Him. Love for God for God's sake ought to be the dominating factor in our life. Without that supreme motive all in our life is vain. Not only must there be love for God but also in order to be pure, He needs to be our objective in the first place. We may never lose sight of God, even as God never forgets Himself.

Therefore, it needs to be a love that takes hold of us completely: and thus, a love in the first place with all of our heart – the heart of which Scripture says: *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life* (Prov.4:23). The primary and deepest motivations in our life should simply be love for God. Thus it needs to be a love with all of our soul. Scripture equates our soul with *all my inmost being* (Ps.103:1). Our soul means all our inner sensitivities. All that affects us in life should produce in us nothing but love for God. We must also love God with our whole mind – that active, that deliberating, that thought pattern-determining faculty in us, must not know any other guideline than the love for God. We must engage all our strength in the service for God, and when we do that God's love in us will grow.

That is righteousness with respect to God. Righteousness means that we give to each person what is theirs. We only give to God what is His when we give ourselves to Him fully and without reservation. In that relationship to Himself, governed by the law of love, God has placed us in His covenant. We need to remain in that every day. This is the first and great commandment – the commandment that governs the one of the second table of the law.

In light of that love for God we must see and love our neighbor, and in the same way ourselves. The law is also covenant law in the second table. With such love for ourselves and our neighbor, we will remain in covenant with the Lord. We will not dispossess ourselves of the Lord's covenant with self-love, and neither our neighbor with neighbor-love. The second commandment is like the first, is given with the first, and is not different than the first. In ourselves and in our neighbor we must love God. Yet, according to the flesh, we can neither love ourselves nor our neighbor. Still, the commandment is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, and then both because of God's will as seen in the light of God's love for us and for our neighbor.

However, there is a love for ourselves in which we rob ourselves of God – a sinful self-indulgence, which can express itself in the spiritual as well as in the physical dimension of our life. There is a satisfaction with ourselves in personal pride, but also and most detestably in a so-called spiritual pride, such as when a person boasts of his knowledge of and relationship with God. The equilibrium of our lives then lies within our own self. Almost unnoticed at times, we then slip from resting in God to finding such rest in ourselves.

Then we are, as far as our spiritual side is concerned, not in God's service and we do not love ourselves for God's sake. In fact, we do not see that also as to the spiritual side of us we must be entirely from God and through God and to God. That wrong self-love also can show up in the physical part of our existence. We can misuse our body in many different ways, not only as pride in bodily strength and a boasting of physical achievements, but also in the use of our body as an instrument of lust. Even our physical life must be dear to us only for God's sake. However, we will lapse into an improper self-love in one direction or the other when love for self does not stand in the light of love for God.

There is also the kind of love for our neighbor wherein we want to deprive God of that neighbor. Sometimes we can be jealous of God precisely in the most intimate of relations. When we want to love our neighbor differently than in obedience to God's will, there is bound to be some kind of a competitive tension between the relation of the neighbor to God and his connection with us. Even in the most intimate of relations, we may not see each other differently than as God's gift. Moreover, we must also see the life of the neighbor only as from God and through God and to God. The wrong love for the neighbor, just as our improper self-love, can focus either on his spiritual or on the physical side of his life. In that case, it becomes impossible to build each other up in life in the true sense of the word. Instead, our love for the neighbor will then readily tend to degenerate into exploitation of him for ourselves, whether spiritually or physically. In this matter God's requirement is emphatic and the only redemption of our life and our relationship lies in the acceptance of that absolute demand.

However, obeying that commandment should not be so difficult for us. Love for God and love for the neighbor as well as for ourselves for God's sake, finds its norm in God's love because that love has made all things. When we see that *motif* of the demand to love, the problem of whether love can be required or whether love can be a commandment should not be a problem any more. Nevertheless, one could posit the proposition that love can never be coerced and that instead it must be given freely and spontaneously. We would then have concluded that our heart could never be subject to a command. With this we would have stated the thesis that the human heart is autonomous, and we would thus have deified man's heart.

This entire line of thought is in opposition to the truth that all things, and thus also the human heart, have been created by the Word of God. By virtue of the fact that God created all things by His Word, He thereby placed life under the constraint of obedience. Thus, love became an obligation to be obeyed since in the beginning the Word of love created all. God's love has spoken and by that Word has called all things into being; thus from the beginning that love has placed life under obligation to respond to it. In this way from our side, love is an obligation and a debt that we must pay but can never fully pay, and therefore we will always be in debt to love. Thus, love has become a law.

Nothing demands so much and so absolutely the way love does. We may be able to satisfy many obligations and numerous debts, but the debt of love is endless. Even when we have given all, love still asks for more. God's love in its call for an answer is all demanding – and is entitled to do so as the divine love that created us by its Word. Moreover, that love will never relinquish its claim, and even in hell the demand to love persists. In this way our love for God finds its *motif* and norm in God's love that created us.

The same is true for our love for self and for our neighbor. The Word of God's love focused our mind also on ourselves and on our neighbor. All those relations also are called into being by the Word of God's love. Therefore our love in those relations also finds its ground and its norm in God's love. This demand is thus also unequivocal. We can never satisfy the obligation of love for ourselves or our neighbor. We may be able to pay fully the debt for taxes, revenue, respect, and honor; yet the apostle Paul adds: *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law* (Rom.13:8). For us this debt is unending and so immense when we have seen the love of God that created those relationships as the reason for it. Then every love must be a holy love that is a God-devoted love, and an answer to His love.

## ***Inclined by Nature to Hate***

It is obvious that the confession of the catechism: *No. I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbor* will face opposition. That there is much that falls short in our love for God and the neighbor will likely not meet any resistance. That we have given to God and men what is theirs and in that sense have practiced righteousness, only a few superficial persons would maintain. Something completely different, however, is the question of whether we could even properly speak of hating, or at least of being *inclined by nature to hate*.

When we consider Scripture there can be no doubt that this confession is possible, as we read: *the sinful mind is hostile to God* (Rom.8:7). Nevertheless, there may well be difficulties also among us when we focus on the Holy Spirit's work in all men, believers and unbelievers. Is there only a conquering of sin through faith, when also in a life of unbelief there is yet a sin-restraining influence of the Holy Spirit? How can we speak of being *inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbor* when we recognize such efforts by the Holy Spirit?

Without doubt, we need to observe here that we confess that we are *inclined by nature*. With that *by nature* is meant of course, according to our nature as corrupted by sin. Not for a moment may we leave room for the idea that sin would be natural, and that life according to the law of the covenant is unnatural. Sin is abnormal and unnatural. Moreover, the confession uses the words: *I am inclined*. With that, enough room is left for the idea that such a tendency can be suppressed, and that not only does it not need to come to deeds, but also not even to words or thoughts. Within us, there can also be a dormant inclination. However, thus far we have said little about the actual state of affairs. To see this clearly, we must consider separately the relationship to God and the relationship to the neighbor.

Is it possible outside of faith in Christ to speak of any love for God at all? That question has the appearance of having been answered by the Scriptural considerations above; yet it seems that there is much searching for God among people without that faith. It is even possible to point to those who devote a lifetime in service of God, as they believe Him to be. The question is whether all of this should not be characterized as a service for payment, something like buying, or perhaps as a giving in order to get something in return, and therefore it essentially is pride and egoism, and not love. It is true that also in love there is always a longing to obtain something for ourselves. However, this is a wishing in love and not a buying or earning, but it is a longing by faith based on the conviction that we have received everything – in fact it is a yearning for ourselves found in the desire we have for the wellbeing of the one we love.

Does that mean that all seeking God without faith in Christ constitutes a service rendered for wages? Although we must agree that for a great part such expressions of 'worship' show no other characteristic, yet God continues to draw and to appeal to humanity. Nothing originates exclusively with man; but something first comes from God, of which the searching by man is but the consequence. If nothing originated with God, Scripture would not be able to declare man guilty as it does in these words: *so that men are without excuse* (Rom.1: 20). What does it mean then for men: this appeal and influence of God? Is the result of it any sort of love? When love is understood as a conscious surrendering – and love should be understood in this way – the question must be answered in the negative.

Unbelieving man gives evidence of being sustained and drawn by God in spite of himself. This may be seen in their various worship services and devotions; but such 'worship' really constitutes idolatry, and made to a representation of God that they themselves have formed, but not of the living God. This worship always happens with the rejection of the Word-revelation, of the covenant, and of the law of the covenant – thus in disobedience. However, the first thing true love teaches is obedience to God. Without faith in Christ, men determinedly reject God as He chooses to reveal Himself to us in His covenant, in the Word of covenant, and in the law of the covenant. Clearly therefore, there is no love for God without faith.

Thus, the hate to which we are inclined by nature could remain covered by the love for a self-produced view of God. Nevertheless, even in this worship man's self-determination with respect to the living God becomes evident. The more men realize such autonomy, the more intensely they devote themselves to that sort of worship: the burnt offerings on Israel's heights were normally better attended than the sacrifices rendered in Jerusalem's temple! Even today the world is

full of religious devotion, but they represent an opposition to and a rejection of the God of the covenant. Only through faith in Christ, as we demonstrated above, God becomes truly known and we are able to love Him.

In that light we must now also consider the love for our neighbor. Is there love for the neighbor outside of faith in Christ? It is undeniable that such love shows in various ways that people without true faith are able to love one another dearly. Moreover, it would certainly be unjust if we qualified such love as pure egoism, for a kind of altruism – a loving of the neighbor for his own sake – is possible. That means however a love for that neighbor as one sees him and as he himself imagines the person to be. Yet, without faith we always see our neighbor improperly, for we do not see him as from God and for God. We consistently need to maintain therefore that in such a case a person never really knows his neighbor but has an erroneous and flawed picture of him.

Our neighbor truly becomes known to us only through faith in Christ. If a person should ever imagine, even for a moment, that the neighbor whom he loves outside of faith in Christ, is from God and for God, he would be prepared – seeing him therefore as he really is – to hate him. From the enmity against God, hate for the neighbor begins immediately when the neighbor is viewed this way. Therefore, in the most intense neighbor love there is a very strong enmity against God. People tend to be strengthened together in their love for one another and against God. If love for one another does not proceed from faith in Christ, men not only have an incorrect understanding of each other, but they make sort of an idol of each other, and that mutual admiration pushes aside the worship of God. They really have not truly discovered each other, and thus they have not been delivered from their loneliness in the deepest sense.

The truth is that they have not discovered eternal fellowship, for only in finding such communion in Christ men are set free from their lonely isolation. The measure of their solitude will become evident in a terrifying manner when they appear in the judgment, and letting go of each other, fall back exclusively on themselves. In their hearts hate is found against their neighbor as he is from God and for God, even if they suppress that hatred by the relationship to the neighbor as they suppose him to be – a relationship that in fallen humanity is the result of the preserving work of the Spirit.

We must not forget that we confess this with respect to ourselves, namely that we are *inclined by nature to hate God and our [my] neighbor*. That inclination, that ability to hate, which remains with us and is suppressed within us by a love for God and a love for our neighbor that is not genuine. Frequently that love for God and the love for our neighbor as we have this from ourselves appear to be only weak means to suppress the hatred. Not only in the unbelieving world but also in the believer enmity against God and hatred against the neighbor sometimes breaks out. Everyone who knows himself well is not overly amazed at the hatred in the world. The tendency toward hatred within us, however, is not overcome by that love from ourselves in the sense that it is rooted out.

That kind of victory is exclusively the result of love through faith. When the Spirit of God creates love within us through faith, it is not a reason for us to boast. In fact, the Spirit in producing that love could not make use of and connect to the love that we seemed to have from within ourselves. On the contrary, the love through the Spirit condemns as sinful the love we produced by ourselves, and conquers it. Under the law of the covenant there is just one judgment over ourselves possible, namely that we have nothing with which we could stand before God. This knowledge of our misery is therefore, as we noted at the beginning, faith knowledge.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 3****6. Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?**

*No, on the contrary, God created man good and in His image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.*

**7. From where, then, did man's depraved nature come?**

*From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise, for there our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.*

**8. But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil?**

*Yes, unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.*

**Unsolvable Questions**

What we mentioned at the beginning of the commentary on Lord's Day 2, needs to be noted here as well, namely that the knowledge of our misery is knowledge by faith or what might be called faith knowledge, and that the misery as we see it here can be confessed only by faith. The fall into sin by our first parents with its consequences can only be seen by faith, as well as the fact that we are unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil.

Furthermore, the rest of this Lord's Day – man being created in God's image with all that is related to it – we are able to see the full meaning of that also only by faith. Moreover, with respect to the first matter of this Lord's Day, the rejection of the idea that God created us wicked and perverse, such is the case as well. This is the first subject that we intend to discuss here.

Without faith, one can certainly produce a rationale of why God could not have created us so wicked and perverse. This thought appears obvious to the general religious awareness. However, then they have not really faced the actual problem. If faith is not present – and every time we mean faith in God through Christ – two things cannot be taken seriously. The first is that all things, and thus also man, were created from and through and unto God's love; and the second is that man is as wicked and perverse as the catechism posits. Because they do not take either of the two seriously, they do not feel the difficulty in accepting both simultaneously.

With respect to the first idea, Scripture says that only *by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command* – that is the Word of His love – *so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible* (Hebr.11:3). In Hebrews 11, the struggle of faith is highlighted: it holds on to the things that are invisible. The mindset of contemporary people and of the world cannot fathom that the world was formed through the Word of God's love, since this can only be understood by faith. Also in this, *faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see* (Hebr.11:1). Without faith they do not face that difficulty in the same measure, because then God's love and the being of all things from and through and unto that love never was an actual reality.

On the other hand, people without faith as to the seriousness of sin and misery are not able to accept the course of justice. For us sin becomes fully a reality only when we see it as guilt before God. And without faith it will never be that. Only faith understands the severity of the words: *so wicked and perverse*, which means leaving God and willfully turning against Him.

Moreover, faith is offended by the problem that exists in accepting the reality of both those matters. How can it be that this world and especially man came from God's love and yet sin is found in man, which is an element totally foreign to God? Only faith knows the struggle involved in this. Once more, we repeat that we mean faith in God through Christ, for only that faith has responded to God's love, and is able to understand how the origin of man and of the world lies in God's love. Such faith always wrestles with the possibility and reality of sin. How can something proceeding from God become so depraved? Does not the fact that His love is the fountainhead of creation exclude every possibility of sin? Or, if we must diagnose – also by faith – the reality of sin, do we have to accept that God's love, which is an almighty love, willed and intended this sin? In this case, it is again only faith that knows and understands the love of God and will maintain that it could never have willed sin, and that there is not a single connection between the intent of His love and sin.

Only faith retains that tension. Only faith that trusts God can leave question marks because it humbles itself at the same time before God, Whose doing and willing transcends all minds. Faith has its difficulties, even more than unbelief, but it can tolerate these as unresolved problems for God's sake. It cannot do other than assume that these must exist, because it knows God as the Incomprehensible One. We need to prepare ourselves to face irresolvable questions, especially in this Lord's Day.

Unbelief will attempt to force a solution. It will seek to avoid the seriousness and the completely being-against-God nature of sin, and therefore seek to reach an ostensible solution. Or, it will attempt to encroach upon God's holiness and almighty power – upon His all-encompassing love. Unbelief will not be able let the problem exist. Only by faith are we able to accept it as insoluble and continue unmoved in our confidence and trust in Him, Who created all things from and through and unto His love.

### ***Created in God's Image***

In addition to this, we discover something else in the confession of faith as well, namely that the original man and the original world were not provisional, and thus needed to be set aside and overcome and then in such a way that through redemption or recreation something different than the first creation would come about. Also in this proposition, there is at least an attempt to understand something of the origin of sin, and it does not avoid the problem. Sin would then have been necessary in order that the first world should be replaced by a second. We must also reject this effort.

However, we cannot deny that God did not achieve in the original creation what He wished to bring to fruition at the end of history. God's plan envisioned a greater glory than what was initiated in the paradise setting. That does not mean however that the first wonder had to be put aside by the second, and in that sense overcome by it. God would then have produced the second marvel out of the first; and without sin there would have been a straight line between the beginning and the end.

Nevertheless, even now that sin has come into the world, redemption means restoration and also the completion of what was first created. The first answer of this Lord's Day leads us to no other thought. Not only do we read in it that God created man good and in His own image, but also that from that event a straight line could be drawn to the ending, through which man would *live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him*. There is thus no trace of the idea that the first creation produced something that needed to be overcome or replaced by the recreation. Nor do we find any hint of the idea that redemption is anything other than the restoration and the completion of what was first created. God does not forsake His original intention in the redemption, but reaches that now via the detour of sin and the cross of Christ.

Therefore, we must see that original situation as lofty as the catechism portrays it. Along with this, we need to mention immediately that we can understand it only by faith, since the issue is: what is the primary intent of man's creation in the image of God? This is found in the fellowship of men with God, as also the catechism mentions here. Without faith, we can reason quite a bit about the image of God in man, but are we able to comprehend the most important purpose of the

creation of man in God's image as consisting in his fellowship with God, unless we through faith in Christ have been restored to that fellowship? Without faith, we are able to say little of value about its actual significance.

The catechism also mentions that the most important purpose of the creation of man in God's image was in the fellowship with God. That purpose is explained in all that follows the words "so that": *so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him*. Briefly stated it means that man would have eternal fellowship with God. All too often, we see these things from man's point of view and then in this way, that therein for man would be the greatest happiness. Nevertheless, there is a fundamentally different side: God wanted a response to His love from the world He created; God's honor and pleasure were in the response that He would receive from the world. For that, He made man in His own image.

We always stand in amazement about the fact that God could receive a response to His love from the world He created that satisfied Him, and from which He derived honor and pleasure. After all, what does dust and ashes mean to Him? In the creation of man in God's image, we see the kind of prominence of man we can hardly realize or describe. God brought forth a creature who was able give a voluntary response to His love, something that was actually an answer that thus responded to God's love. Man was, and continued to be a creature, fully in God's hand and controlled by Him; and yet there also needed to be in that man his own responsibility – something spontaneous that went out from him as his own choice, his own answer. Even as God decides and chooses for Himself, so also man must decide and choose for himself. Moreover, something similar was not found in any creature on earth – later we will speak about angels. This personal responsibility is the first thing we observe in the image of God.

This is merely the formal aspect of God's image, and at the same time remains its permanent part. Also, those who are lost retain their own responsibility, even as they use this negatively for the eternal rejection of God's love. In the creation of man, so much was connected with this personal responsibility: and because man needed to be a creature with his own responsibility, he was a creature with faith, with love, with a sense of justice and of beauty, with language, with brains, with feelings, etc. All this belongs to the image of God in a formal sense, and cannot be lost; even though it can all in the negative sense be turned against God.

With his own personal responsibility came also man's ability potentially to turn away from God. The response of love needed to be given by a free and independent decision. Only then was it an answer that would satisfy God. And only then was it truly a response, a deed of a creature who was God's image. We say sometimes that man was created "changeably good." That could hardly be different in his being created in God's image. The hour of decision needed to come; only when he had chosen for God's love in his own responsibility would he eternally remain in that relationship with God. Then his entire subsequent life would be governed by, and bear the character of that first voluntary decision and thus fully satisfy God.

However, all this concerns only the formal facet of the image of God. Now, it is also true that one can never speak of that as purely formal. In all his functions we mentioned above, in his faith and love, his sense of justice and of beauty, his knowledge and feelings, man is never neutral nor has he ever even for a moment been neutral. Even before the choice with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, man was not neutral before God. After all, he could turn one way or the other. Before the choice, he was devoted to God and dutiful. He was very good, for the image of God also had the content of the knowledge of God, righteousness and holiness. Any other way is unthinkable. Therefore, we say here that *God created man good and in His image*. In his believing and loving, in his sense of justice and beauty, in his knowledge and feelings, he was committed to God; and in all of that was contained the meaning of Who God was for him, and man responded to this. And in that sense he had knowledge of God, a knowing in love and in fellowship, because God spoke with him and he understood God's love in that. There was also righteousness, a giving to God to what He was entitled: man's whole life as a voluntary dedication. In addition, man reacted to all he experienced in complete purity and holiness – no inappropriate passion consumed him.

We should not forget, however, that also at that time in all that happened faith guided man. The relationship of faith to the Word of God was also in that first situation all-controlling. Through faith, Adam had the knowledge of God, the righteousness, and the holiness; in fact, he possessed nothing apart from his faith. Also before the choice man lived by

faith in the Word of God. When we speak of the substance of the image of God, the knowledge of God, the righteousness, and the holiness, we should not think of its content, that is, of a particular measure of knowledge, righteousness and holiness that was given to Adam at creation. What is involved is that man was created so that he was predisposed in faith to God and in this way came to know Who God would be for him, and he learned to understand and to love and thus knew how to respond. Through believing God's Word, he needed to cleave to God and to remain devoted to Him.

It is true that man was created with that frame of mind: disposed toward God. That direction was God-instilled, but it still had to become man's voluntary choice, and he needed to persevere in what God had given to his life at creation. Thus, there was indeed the image of God in the material sense, but he needed to choose yet for what he had received. That was still a provisional, temporary limitation of the image of God: with respect to the material side, it was still possible to lose it.

In this response of love, in this fellowship that man had with God in receiving and answering God's love, was contained the most significant meaning of his being created in the image of God. From this beginning, in unbroken development, should have proceeded the completion of the fellowship in eternal blessedness. Therein also lay the purpose for man's creation. God glorifies Himself most in the fellowship He wished to maintain with men. Moreover, He will attain that objective finally at the end of time, in the consummation by Christ. What Christ will do at the time of the consummation, does not mean an overcoming and setting aside of what God had created once upon a time, but a restoration and a glorification of it.

### ***God's Covenant with Adam***

Adding to this however, we need to connect it immediately with the covenant God made with Adam. It must be admitted that there is no literal mention of a covenant in Genesis 2 and 3. Nevertheless, we read there of the establishment of a covenant: in the tree of life we are given the sealing of the promise of the covenant, while with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil God announced death as punishment for breaking the covenant. That there is an actual establishment of a covenant is confirmed by the use of the Name "LORD God" in Genesis 2 and 3, while in Genesis 1 only "God" is used. The use of God's covenant name convinces us that Scripture wishes to tell us here of the establishing of the covenant. When we see this, we do not need the evidence of Hosea 6: 7, since this reference is questionable, and because the words *like Adam, they have broken the covenant* also permit the translation "as a man they have broken the covenant."

We need to speak by faith about the covenant of God with Adam. This means first of all that we see the covenant as an arrangement of the sovereign God. It originated unilaterally from Him in His sovereign will. Nothing obligated Him to establish this covenant. In addition, there were not two independent parties who entered the covenant together, but God shared that covenant with man and placed him in it.

This was a sovereign arrangement of His favor. We again are astonished here about what God was prepared to do with respect to man, who is His creation and is but dust and ashes. On the one hand, God can bend down so far toward man, and yet on the other hand elevate him so highly that man becomes a party in covenant with God, so that God is on familiar terms with him as a friend with a friend, and they can exchange an intimate love with each other. That was as we already noted the purpose of man's creation. God did not merely desire a creature over whom He could rule with sovereign authority, and who knew nothing other than complete creaturely dependence; but God desired a creature to whom He could relate in giving and receiving love.

The latter is not possible without the covenant. Without establishing the covenant, all rights would be one-sidedly with God, and man would have only obligations. Moreover, with God there would be only sovereign justice, while with man only a creaturely dependence. Then a relationship between God and man, and a mutual responding to each other in love would be impossible. Such a relationship is possible only in the covenant, in which man also has rights and can depend on God. God has granted rights to the man by giving him His promises. Thus, immediately when the man received a promise, he with it obtained the right to hold God to that promise, and God assumes the obligation to fulfill that promise. Then there are mutual rights and obligations, and the law of the covenant governs the entire relationship between God and man, and God's dealing with men is not an arbitrary arrangement, but man knows that he can depend on God. Only then a

mutual relationship of love is possible. Then both parties are able to exchange even the hidden matters in their lives. *The LORD confides in those who fear Him; He makes His covenant known to them* (Psalm 25: 14).

That the entire relationship between God and man is placed under the law of the covenant, and that the man can count on God, does not diminish God's sovereignty. After all, it was in His sovereign determination that He tied His relationship with man to the law. God Himself is above the law, but in His sovereign decree His relationship with man is not outside of the law. Moreover, that it was God's sovereign design in which He bound Himself to the law in His relationship to us, and that this is thus God's lawful relationship with us, we realize and understand by faith. Thus, it is that even in the most intimate relationship with God, the "fear" of the Lord always remains. Through faith, we pray to God even more because He could bend down so far to us, and was willing to bind the relationship with us to the law.

Even though the initiation of the covenant was a one-sided determination by God, yet this was connected to the creation of man in the image of God. Actually we should say this differently: the creation of man in God's image was related to the establishment of the covenant. It is true, that the creation of man came first, and after that the initiation of the covenant – that could not have been different. However, the covenant already determined the creation of man: the man was created after God's image, so that he could be in covenant with God. In addition, according to the law of the covenant he would be able to respond to God's love, which he just like the law of the covenant, received from God.

Thus, although establishing the covenant with Adam emanated unilaterally from God, yet it was a gracious, sovereign act of God. The relationship in the covenant, however, was according to the nature of the situation a bilateral relationship in which the man bore his own responsibility. Moreover, that relationship was mutually bound by the law of the covenant.

### ***The Covenant of God's Favor***

While man in paradise lived in spiritual fellowship with God, the decision still needed to be made that he would obtain eternal life – even though he already lived a spiritual life. This reality should not lead us to speak of a covenant of works in the sense that Adam needed by works to earn eternal life for himself and his descendants. From the preceding it should have been sufficiently clear that the purpose of the covenant consisted in the communion or fellowship of love between God and man. Since we had been placed in such a fellowship and lived in it, there could be no question of earning wages. With this mutual interaction of giving and receiving love, every thought of wages is excluded. Should we nevertheless maintain that idea, would we really take into account the marvelous wonder of the relationship between God and Adam?

Something entirely different is the question of whether once a person has fallen out of that relationship, he could earn his way back into it. Yet that is what actually happened. For our sake, Christ was outside of it but gained this again for Himself and those who belonged to Him. He could do this because He was not only man but also God. Once we are placed in that relationship however, every thought of earning and wages is removed.

Moreover, when some would say that Adam by his works had to earn eternal life and that we receive this by grace, they might seek to explain it as the difference between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. However, in this comparison they would make the error that in the first instance they would speak of the head of the covenant, namely Adam, while in the second instance not of the Head Christ, but of the members. In such a comparison, they really should place the two heads over against each other and even then, it would be much more feasible to speak of a covenant of works with respect to the second instance, since Christ's merit forms the foundation of the entire covenant relationship.

In order to prevent every wrong notion, and to preserve the magnificence of the covenant relations between God and Adam, it is therefore better in the first instance to refer to the covenant of God's favor, while the other should be designated the covenant of God's grace. In the first covenant, man would receive God's undeserved favor – also not earned by Adam – in the second covenant the new humanity enjoys the once forfeited favor or grace earned by Christ. After all, grace is forfeited favor.

In this covenant of favor, God accepted man as His child. Thus, God gave him His love as His child. In being accepted as child, and in receiving the love from God as Father, the 'son-ship' of man (*i.e.* the relationship to God) is determined and

defined – and not only through the creation of men, and not merely in having been created after God’s image. He did not become God’s child because he was created in the image of God, for angels are also accepted by God as children and Scripture does not say that they are created in God’s image. In His sovereign good pleasure, God revealed Himself as Father, and in His Father-love He was prepared to give Himself to the man, through which he became the child of God. Of course, the creation of man was controlled by God’s determination to make him His child. Man was created in God’s image so that in the full sense of the word, and in a higher sense than the angels, he could be God’s child and able to respond to God’s love.

Nevertheless, we need to take into consideration the fact that Adam could still squander and lose the fellowship in which he lived with God. He could not earn anything for he had been placed in that fellowship by God’s favor, and only had to choose for what he had received. Thus, he had to demonstrate by way of the obedience of faith the value he placed on God’s love, for the love he gave to God in that fellowship needed to reflect that it was given entirely voluntarily. Therefore, Adam still had to face the test.

Scripture points to the provisional nature of the paradise setting in 1 Corinthians 15 where we read of the natural life, which we received from Adam, over against a spiritual life that we received from Christ. The psychical or natural life came first, while the pneumatic or spiritual life came afterward. In that context we read, *the first man Adam became a living being, the last Adam a life-giving Spirit* (1 Cor.15:45). What Adam received was the natural, psychical life that by way of his voluntary choice and perseverance, still had to be glorified to the spiritual, pneumatic life. What we receive through Christ is the pneumatic or spiritual life, which cannot be lost.

We note here in passing that we are able to form an idea of the psychical or natural life in paradise, because we still share that same psychical life even though now it is corrupted by sin. However, we cannot form a concept of the glorified pneumatic or spiritual life because it far surpasses life of the present time. Therefore, we must consider the events in paradise of Genesis 2 and 3 as actual descriptions – the kind of setting that we are able to consider with our minds. However, when the book of Revelation in its concluding chapters speaks of the future spiritual glory, it needs to refer to it in images taken from this natural life, for such a situation we could not picture in our minds.

As mentioned above, by means of Adam’s choice and perseverance the losable psychical, natural life needed to be glorified to the non-losable pneumatic, spiritual life. Yet, the idea of earning and wages does not have a place here. What reward could there be in accepting and remaining in the favor we received? The faith of man can only chose what he receives, and only accept what has been given to him; and this never has a creating, earning power. There was, however, a disrespectful disdain when he rejected what he possessed, and he would bear the judgment of the rejected love. He then rejected the fullness of the love that God had spoken in the eternal Word, and which came to him through that Word. For surely *in the beginning was the Word* (John 1:1), and in that Word was the life of fellowship with God, for *in Him was life, and that life was the light of men* (John 1:4). Thus, also Adam possessed nothing outside of the Son as the eternal Word.

In that communion with God through the eternal Word Adam needed to grow and be strengthened. And in this way he would be able to fulfill his calling as head, and thus to choose for all of mankind. Already then, with the choice in the first covenant, the eternal Word revealed His importance in maintaining from His side, the fellowship with Adam. When Adam severed the fellowship, the eternal Word Himself became Adam, the second Adam. He took it upon Himself to reconcile and restore what Adam destroyed.

Man needed to live in fellowship with God through the eternal Word. This love met him throughout the entire world that was created by the Word. At that time, a sacrament was impossible. For in a sacrament a few elements out of all creation are selected, in order that these would say something different to us than what the apostle Paul writes: *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven* (Rom. 1:18). Of that, there was no possibility in the original paradise setting. What focused the attention of all creation on the tree of life with its fruit that represented a similarity to a sacrament, was that it signified and sealed God’s favor to Adam. His eating of that fruit meant for him eating and drinking of God’s favor, and to choose for that favor. Therefore, the two trees were placed over against each other in the middle of the garden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eating of the one tree meant to choose forever for God’s favor, while eating of the other was a forsaking of that favor.

All the riches given to him in this covenant relationship were clarified for man in the marital relationship, which God ordained after that. With that was also given the beginning of the historical development of the human race. Not only in the beginning but also in its entire history, mankind in unity with Adam needed to answer God's love in His covenant. In the way of that covenant communion, the development of all that God had established on and in this world must thus take place.

### ***The Kingdom of God***

Scripture directly links man having dominion to creating him in God's image: *Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground* (Gen.1:26). The dominion of man over all that is created apparently was one of the most significant purposes in God's image. And in that authority of man the kingdom of God has come. Genesis 1 relates to us the establishment of the kingdom of God. We must not forget here what we noted above concerning the purpose of the creation of man in God's image, namely the fellowship between God and man. Living in that fellowship man would have dominion over all of creation, and he would as head for the entire world, in praise and adoration give the response of love to God.

The whole world therefore was also prepared for and oriented toward man, in order that through that world, which was for him a revelation and evidence of God's love, he would be confirmed in his fellowship with God. Scripture indicates that when it reveals to us that all things were created by the eternal Word and *without Him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:3). The communion or fellowship between God and man, maintained by the eternal Word, already controlled the creation of the entire world and also determined the relationship between man and the world. The origin and existence of "nature" is governed by the favor God wished to give to man. That favor is therefore not something that was added to nature, but was its starting-point and the purpose of all of natural life – its controlling *motif*. In this way, the favor restored by Christ – thus the grace – contains the controlling *motif* of nature. All thought of a certain dualism between nature and grace must be banned. That can happen only when we discern that already in the beginning God's favor was the determining *motif* of nature.

Since the dominion over all the works of God's hands was an important purpose in creating man in the image of God, we find here an answer to the question why this is said only of humans, but not of the angels. It is true that angels are called *the sons of God* (Job 38:7), but we do not read that they are the image of God. Moreover, they are not called to rule over all the works of His hands in the Name of God; instead, one day they also will be subject to men. Even now already, they are *ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation* (Hebr.1:14). Ruling in God's Name apparently forms a significant element of the image of God.

This dominion of man did not mean a kind of autonomy, as if man were a law unto himself. The exercise of that governing was subject to the law of the covenant. God's law does not merely direct the relationship of men with God, but also the relationship with all creation. Thus, also in the first covenant there was gift and demand, promise and calling, favor and law. In the way that the favor of God emanating from all of creation was encountered by men, the law also directed his relationship with all created things. As comprehensive as the gospel is for us, so far-reaching is the law also for us; for where the gift of God is there is also His demand.

### ***The Probationary Command***

Sometimes the question is raised which of these is of greater value: when we do good spontaneously – without any thought to the command – or when we do it in conscious obedience to the law. If we were to think that the former is preferable, the paradise story should bring us to different insight. Before the choice in connection with the probationary command, Adam did the good entirely spontaneously, because from his heart came only good. At that time, however, he was still below the level at which the communion with the LORD must be. We must be in covenant with Him in all of our life; and that includes that we do things in conscious obedience to the law of the covenant, and in conscious conformity to the will of Him Who established the covenant.

Only when the possibility of conflict between our own insight and the will of God arises, can we come to a deliberate and intentional bowing before the Word of God in which He gave us His will. Thus, God gave man the probationary command in order to bring him to such deliberate, conscious obedience. That testing was necessarily related to man's creation in the image of God and to the personal responsibility connected with that. His inclination toward God as part of his created nature needed to become a voluntary choice through obedience to the command. Through that obedience, we see the law not as an arbitrary but as the appropriate norm for the relationship of love with God. The law as such and the gospel are not in conflict with each other, but God's fellowship is received in the way of keeping His commands.

The entire relationship of man with the law became evident in connection with the probationary command. The tree, by which man was to be tested, was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That name cannot mean that man by eating of that fruit would learn good and evil. We do not learn evil as wickedness by doing it; instead, in doing so we become dulled by it. When we see things in the light of God's covenant and thus also in the light of His law, we cannot think of the knowledge of evil as an experience of sin with its desire and lust, but we must think of a knowledge of evil in the light of the law and thus of a condemnation of it. Therefore, a person cannot learn evil by doing it.

Nevertheless, God said after the fall, *The man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil!* (Gen.3:22). Especially from the words *like one of Us*, it appears that what is involved here is a choice, the decision: the man has placed himself next to Us, and has himself become a god and has decided independently – outside of Us – concerning good and evil. By *knowing* therefore, we need to think of choosing or deciding. Thus, with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil it needed to be demonstrated how Adam would decide about good and evil: in dependence on God and in harmony with His Word, or independently and dissociating himself from God.

Moreover, we must not forget that the decision with respect to the fruit of that one tree constituted the decision for all of creation. How would man use all of creation was at issue: as a sovereign arrangement and a free gift of God in keeping with His words, *You are free to eat from any tree in the garden* (Gen.2:16), or based on an assumed right of nature? Would he enjoy this world as a gift or as plunder? The decision about this question was made by his attitude toward this one tree. If he did not eat of that one tree God had denied him, he would thereby indicate that he saw the usage of the entire world only as a gift from God.

It would be in this way then that man's authority would be over all that God had created, and he would not bring death to himself by eating of all of God's creation, but he would enjoy it and it would strengthen him in his fellowship with God. Because of sin however we can no longer fully use this world; and by eating of it we bring death to ourselves because we possess it as pillage. Only faith, which is obedient, views and receives all of creation as a gift from God. Then for us the use of it constitutes a life in fellowship with God. And then for man there also would be the controlling influence of the tree of life. However, when his heart was drawn to eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he was thereby bound, and no longer had the ability to eat of the tree of life. By eating of the tree of life the use of the entire world would have become his life and he would have preserved his freedom and dominion.

### ***The Origin of Sin***

The problem of the origin of sin always will remain insoluble. Where did evil come from in an entirely pure world? Moreover, where did the idea of evil come from in the hallowed realm of angels? The origin of sin cannot find its explanation in something created by God, in the sense that therein the source of sin is to be found. For surely, everything God had created was sacred, and what is holy cannot be the source of sin.

The attempt by the Roman Catholic Church to explain the origin of sin contains an internal contradiction. She views that origin in the natural desires man had received at creation. That natural longing was not in itself a sin, but became the source of sin. That is connected with the concept that considers natural desires lower than grace. That lower nature revolted against grace, which consisted especially in the image of God.

We must reject this entire dualistic conception concerning man. All that God gave to man at creation, all his desires, resulted from the favor God wished to give him through the eternal Word. In that fellowship, all his desires – the lower as well as the higher – must be dedicated to the Lord and they were in fact holy to Him. In all his desires, man was completely good and inclined toward God. Thus, in those desires, being holy, the source of sin could not possibly lie.

In fact, we must reject every attempt to explain the origin of sin. When we wish to seek the source of sin in something that God has created, we always end up at God the Creator, and we would see the cause of sin in Him. Nor is the idea acceptable that evil existed eternally next to and over against God. There are not two kinds of principles from eternity: the good and the evil, for there is only one eternal principle, namely God. It is the curious feature of God's Word that it does not explain the origin of sin. An explanation might possibly contain an excuse for man. Such an explanation and excuse is however found in every non-Christian religion; but the Word of God does not explain the origin of sin and simply declares man guilty. Moreover, it was really to be expected beforehand that the origin of sin would be inexplicable. For sin is really an abnormality in this world, and over against God it is alien and hostile. And if whatever exists at this time must find an explanation of its existence in God, then from what or where could the existence and origin of sin possibly be explained?

We do readily and fully admit that the origin and existence of sin is and remains a mystery for us. At best, we can say about it that sin is not something positive but negative, while all that is positive and good has been brought into being by God. Evil is something without God and His fellowship. Yet it not really merely negative; there is something intentionally deliberate in it, for it withdraws itself from God and stays separate from Him. Moreover, evil is also guilt: it is lacking something that ought to be present, since the creature has robbed himself of the gift of God's fellowship. It is therefore also a deed of the creature. We must not even go behind that action of the creature if we wish to retain the guilt in evil. It is a wanton, willful deed of rebellion and an estrangement from God. It is a fall and disobedience: a falling out of fellowship with God, and disobedience with respect to the law of that fellowship. It was also a choosing of the creature in total willfulness against his own God-inclined nature.

Thus, we face the mystery of the origin and the now continuing existence of sin; the mystery that is so oppressive because evil has become an active force in the world. It has an appearance of being an independent negative principle next to and over against God. However, it can exist only as the antithesis – the negation of the principle of God's love. It will always remain a riddle how in this world, which exists out of the principle of God's love, such a negative element could develop. When through faith we know the principle of God's love we wrestle with the enigma of sin and its consequences.

God Himself constantly holds before us the strange, inexplicable, and abnormal quality of sin. In Scripture He continually places us before the question: why have you turned away from Me and why do you continue to do so? Have I ever fallen short in My love for you? *Have I been a desert to Israel or a land of great darkness?* (Jer.2: 3). The explanation of our sin does not lie in God's love – in the deficiency of His love. On the contrary, when our eyes have been opened for the love of God through faith in Christ, the arbitrariness with which we treat that love once given to us, becomes a constant self-accusation. The enigma of the origin of sin thus becomes at the same time an accusation against ourselves. In this way, that faith considers the mystery of the origin of sin and not merely as a sort of conjecture. We no longer understand how we could be so deceitful, or that we persist in being so faithless. Truly, for us there is no excuse left.

When we look at the outcome we can only say of this mystery that God's demonstrated love in Christ is also able to make use of evil, and in the victory over sin glorifies Himself and will continue to do so.

### ***The Principle of Evil***

According to Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 3: 6, a novice should not be chosen to a church office *or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil*. From this it follows, that pride was the beginning and the essence or principle of sin in the realm of angels. Apparently, the angel made use of the gift of imagination, and envisioned a world wherein God was not God, but in which he himself would be a god. Moreover, he tried to make this imagined world a reality.

Through his temptation, he implanted his vision in man. Because of Adam's fall into sin we all now live with the unreal idea that a world is possible in which God is not God. That is the intoxicating illusion wherein we live daily. Because of this, Scripture constantly admonishes us to be sober and to wake up to the reality that the existence of this world is from, through, and unto God's love. This realization is possible only through faith. Believers are constantly accused that they are not realistic and that they are imagining things, while unbelievers are thought of as people of clear-headed realism. Scripture turns that around and maintains that unbelievers live in an imaginary world. Without faith, we cannot come to God; but what is also true is that we cannot fully grasp the reality of this world without faith, and we cannot see it the way it actually is. Instead, we feed ourselves intentionally with an illusion. We are deceiving ourselves with our own imagination, and we are deceived by it increasingly.

The world is from, through, and unto God's love: a world in which God would not be God would be an irrational absurdity. In fact, the world finds its very meaning in this that God in His love for it is all encompassing, and disconnecting the world from God means to rob it of its intent, and to lead it into senselessness and absurdity. Such has been the action of Satan and of men. Through sin all existence becomes futile, for the meaning of existence is in its fellowship with God, in receiving and responding to His love.

God could have left the world in its sin and ruin, and in the judgment of His love, the justice of His love, He could have triumphed over sin. Then however, the purpose of the creation would not have been obtained and the objective of all creation would not have been achieved. Therefore, in that one single plan of God in which the creation of the world was decided, its redemption was also anchored. On the one hand creation and fall, on the other redemption: both form the one single plan of God. To posit one before the other, as supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism do each in their own way, is an impossibility. God's plan of creation and redemption is one. In order that the purpose of creation would not fail, it required redemption. Redemption presumes the creation. By restoring the fellowship of His love, God has given the world purpose again. It exists now from, through, and unto His love in Christ, even if at this time that love still wrestles with the power of sin.

The objective of all creation was especially the fellowship between God and man, who is God's image. The angels only had a serving purpose for this fellowship. It is remarkable that sin did not have its origin in man – in the rejection of his communion with the LORD. However, it is found in the angels, whose very position served that fellowship. Could it be that the angels wanted to elevate themselves above that status in which they had to serve the fellowship between God and man?

That does not take away that the angels beheld God's glory, while man walked on earth by faith. Related to this is the consideration that the origin of sin among angels must be sought in pride, while with man it is found in unbelief. For man there was yet a higher glory conceivable and reserved, but not so for angels.

Along with the fact that angels already beheld God's glory is connected the reality that for them no salvation was possible. Moreover, the evil originated in the realm of angels without temptation from the outside, as was the case with man. In the third place, we should take note of the fact that angels were not joined together under one head who chose for all, thus neither could they be redeemed under one head since angels do not form an organic unity.

It is true that Scripture does designate Christ as the Commander of the Lord's hosts, that is, of the angels. Moreover, Paul observes in Colossians 1: 20 that God through Christ will *reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven*. Christ has also restored angels to the right relationship with God, although of course atonement for the sins of the not-fallen angels cannot be considered. Angels find the purpose of their existence in serving the fellowship between God and man, and in glorifying God through that communion. According to Isaiah 6: 3 they glorified the Name of the LORD for the purpose that *the whole earth be full of His glory*.

With the breakdown between God and man, the purpose for the existence of angels fell away. When Christ restored the fellowship between God and man, He preserved the reason for the existence of angels at the same time, and again placed them in the proper relationship with God. In the restoration and preservation of the communion between God and man,

Christ also employs the service of angels: *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?* (Hebr.1: 14). And thus He is their Leader and Lord.

That Scripture calls the angels who did not fall *the elect angels* (1Tim.5:21) points to the fact that their perseverance in obedience was determined in God's decree. Nevertheless, all angels chose in their own responsibility. Those who did not maintain their position were preserved by God for judgment. Already at the coming of Christ in the flesh the power of the devil over this world was broken, but one time when the opening of the Abyss will be closed over him, all contact between him and God's renewed world will be cut off. Thus we read that *the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever* (Rev.20:10). But until then he exercises his great influence on earth as God's adversary.

### ***The Temptation by Satan***

Through the Word of God, man was the recipient of God's love as the basic principle of his life. If Satan wanted man to have exposure to the negative equivalent that originated with the fall, he needed to use the word for that purpose as well. This word could not be anything other than a lying word because it had to interpret that negative standard. It is an enigma how the word that God gave and that serves in the first place so that we would have a relationship with the love of God and be able to testify of its truth, could be placed in the service of the negative principle and interpret the lie. We stand before the power of the lie in the world, which as much as the existence of sin in general is a mystery. How can a lie express relationship and provide association? Yet that word has such remarkable power that because of it people of the lie are united and able to understand each other. The power of the word grows especially in the service of the lie, and the word of truth frequently cannot stand up to it.

In paradise, however, Satan needed to establish a link or connection with a nature that was not made for relating to the word of the lie. Moreover, the lie first of all needed to be transposed and converted by that word. Neither the nature of man nor that of the world around him could give Satan any help at that time. In our day however the "world" with its temptation shows sin to us, and our heart is open to sin and presents Satan with the necessary opportunity through the sinful desires that live within us. In the beginning it was not this way. Satan could not succeed through an existing sinful lust, and he could not as with us now work without showing himself in some manner, but he needed to come to man from outside of him and speak with him. Once contact had been made, he could in a variety of ways and through various means continue his actions, while Satan himself remained invisible. However, in paradise his appearance and his speaking was necessary.

Nevertheless, that manifestation needed to be a disguise at the same time. The ungodly principle – hostile to God and human nature – could not openly reveal itself immediately so that it was known in its abominable prospect-less ambition. The intention to place himself in hostility over against God could not be exposed immediately; and thus Satan initially could only propose his aim to make himself independent from God and to elevate himself alongside of Him. Therefore, he needed to come in the appearance of a friend. The animal from the lower creatures and the one closest to man and that *was more crafty than any of the wild animals* (Gen.3:1) was selected as the means by which Satan could direct himself to humans. The whole realm of creatures as they existed under the dominion of man addressed itself in the serpent to the human as its head in order to be free from God. Of course, it could not remain concealed that in the serpent's question the principle of emancipation until then unknown to Adam and Eve would become revealed. However, the question came from a friendly source. It was in this way that Satan's intention was disguised in the words of the serpent.

That the serpent spoke was entirely unexpected! And already in this it was evident that a phenomenon from somewhere else came to mankind. That happening was indeed up to then unknown to them, and thus they needed to be on guard with respect to it. Yet the unknown did have its appeal and generated in them the desire to explore and discover. With that they were touched and enticed by Satan's temptation to discover together a new world and a new life, namely a world and a life that would exist without God. For that world and that life all flesh continues to search, even today.

The serpent's first question to Eve is for information: *Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden?"* (Gen.3:1). With this the lower creature inquires of its head whether God has placed that head not only in complete

dependence but also in utter poverty on earth. The question is thus not merely for information, but at the same time it functions as a demonic incentive to make them self-reliant and free from dependence. Therefore, Satan has the serpent intentionally state God's command incorrectly making it appear hateful. Eve does correct him with respect to the command of God, but the stimulus in the question nevertheless is doing its work.

We must not neglect in each of the facets of the temptation to point out the significance that this particular moment of the temptation has for how sin still happens in our day. We also rationalize before we sin. And an important *motif* that drives us to sin or through which we give ourselves the freedom to sin, is the imagined injustice of which we accuse God. The parameters within which God gives us life, the boundaries of 'may' and 'can' – permission and ability – are always too restrictive for us. Our displeasure with this frequently gives us license to sin. And in this, the stimulus functions toward complete emancipation from God, which drives the lust for what is forbidden by which we are driven to put aside God's entire covenant.

In her answer, Eve repeated God's command accurately, and with it noted that God had threatened death when the command would be violated. It is at this that Satan via the serpent resolutely counters God's Word: *You will not surely die* (Gen. 3:4). By this, the deceptive spirit had become clear in its anti-godly character. Man was bound to God by faith, through the Word of God. Yet that relationship must be broken, thrusting man out of his fellowship with God. When that bond of faith was severed the covenant would be broken.

Related to this is the fact that only in the connection of faith to God's Word do we have the power to repel sin. And only as long as the Word of God exercises this power over us do we cling to it in faith, and reject sin. As soon as we through doubt and unbelief let go of God's Word, we fall away. The decision to sin is then made through unbelief, even as it also was long ago.

The very same reason that earlier had guided Satan, he now seeks to raise up in the heart of man with the words: *you will be like God*. This is the third element discernable in the temptation. Pride functions in the illusion that a world was possible where God was not God. This illusion still holds all of us captive, as we already mentioned. Whatever raises itself against God, and sets itself free from God, readily entices our imagination. We can no longer fully control our sinful feelings of appreciation and admiration for whatever prospers in its freedom from God. This sinful pride at one point arose within us and now continues its pursuit there.

Through all of this, a sinful craving was born in humans through which we see things differently than they are. The floodlight of a stage makes what is faded and imitation, appear fresh and real, and our viewpoint is captivated by it. It is in this way that our view on things is bewitched through that sinful longing. Things then appear to us more desirable and that in a different sense than we ever saw them before. *The woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom* (Gen.3:6). She believed that through that desirability her eyes were opened, for she saw something that before she had never seen. How often do you hear people who have liberated themselves from God's Word say that their eyes now have been opened. Indeed, they see things that they did not see before, and in that perspective they see much and far, often attributing this to the Holy Spirit. In reality however the sinful craving has given them such views.

The woman saw that the tree was good for food. Everything that God had given to man for food to her seemed no longer satisfactory when she could not eat of that one tree. We often imagine a need for ourselves. That tree for her also was pleasing to the eye. To her, that one tree that God had denied her seemed more beautiful than all that God had created. In fact, that tree to her seemed *desirable for gaining wisdom*. That is, in freedom from God she would develop her own insight of what was good and what was evil, and in fact new worlds of knowledge appeared to open up for her. Particularly in this, one can point to the foolishness of sin: the divine prohibition made her entertain the idea that by violating God's command an entirely new world of knowledge would open up and thus add to her happiness. As if God had ever deprived man of any avenue to the fullest and most complete happiness of which he was capable!

From this entire process of the fall into sin it is evident that the path of sin is a lie because it itself is falsehood. It is a denial of the only possible truth of God: that life for man is in His fellowship, and thus it is a denial of God as God.

## ***The Fall of the Head***

It is self-evident that Satan intended especially the fall of Adam, since Adam was the head of the human race in the covenant of God's favor, and not Eve. In him and not in her all of mankind stood or fell. Eve also was included in Adam since God had created her from one of Adam's ribs. Satan first directed his attention to Eve because she had not received God's command directly, and moreover, not being the head she did not have the responsibility Adam bore.

We must imagine for a moment what Eve experienced when she sinned. The entire expectation that Satan had generated within her that she would be free, and that therefore she would be happier, turned out to be disappointing. All fellowship with God as well as with all creation was broken. She must have felt quite alone, while enmity seemingly peered from behind every tree. It was thus the thought must have come up in her mind that she would only be free if Adam chose her side. And we may surmise that she must have made every effort to convince Adam to join her. She needed to pass the thought that Satan had prompted in her on to Adam.

Again, the temptation came from a friendly source. In the way all lower creatures appeared willing to be freed in the man by the word of the serpent, so also Eve wanted to set herself free from God's command via Adam. Moreover, for Adam the issue became whether to choose for God or for the woman God had given him. Not only the temptation of the woman who had liberated herself from the command, but also the fact that God had given them to each other and that they according to His directive should be one, needed to be a consideration. Through the Holy Spirit we must see that a unity desired by God must never become a unity in sin.

In Adam as head the entire human race fell. Yet Adam did not make his choice in isolation, for the human race as far as that existed in him and Eve was joined with him in that choice, just as earlier through the word of the serpent all lower creatures seemed to be with Eve in her choice. Through Adam's choice, however, the human race fell. And thus we confess that *from the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise ... our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin.*

Behind this lies the fellowship that existed in God's covenant of favor between Adam and us. Here we must distinguish between that covenant communion and the linkage by blood. It is inaccurate if we should say that God created that family setting and based the fellowship of the covenant on it. This is inaccurate in the sense that it does not do justice to the proper relationship between the family (the blood ties) and the covenant fellowship. Even as the highest purpose of God's creation existed in the communion or fellowship of the covenant between Him and man, so also the covenant relationship determines the mutual relationship between people. However, if the covenant fellowship were to be a reality, then there also needed to be a blood relationship. In a particular and special way, covenant fellowship finds its expression or manifestation in the family connection.

That Adam was head in the covenant indicates his official position. Even as all citizens of a particular municipality are represented by the mayor as head of that municipality when he acts in an official capacity, so also all people are represented by Adam, and included in him. This position of Adam thus was not dependent on the uniqueness of his nature, but it was given to him with the office with which God entrusted him.

That the catechism talks of *the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve* does not entail a denial of the fact that with Adam's deed the decisive act occurred. In fact, these words reflect and remind us of Adam's temptation by Eve. Thus Eve also was included in Adam in the covenant, and because this covenant fellowship requires a genetic or blood-fellowship, she was created out of Adam. She did indeed sin first and thus separated herself from her head, but Adam covered her deed with his sin.

When the covenant fellowship demands and requires a family setting, God's revelation about that covenant communion does make us reflect on the question of how we must see the connection between parents and children. However, that does not mean that the revelation itself gives us sufficient insight to solve the questions concerning the birth of children. The Word of God is not a book of science, and does not give us an answer to various biological questions. When the church in

connection with God's revelation considers questions that have a biological dimension, she must not attempt to provide premature answers. Theology may try to find a solution for these questions relating them to biology, but at present while the issue is being studied by traducianism, generationalism, and creationism, it is still an unresolved matter.

### ***The Original Sin***

In the very first place sin brings guilt; and there is guilt because God maintains and vindicates Himself and the law of His covenant over against all transgression. Should God circumvent dealing with sin there would be no guilt. And that is an impossible proposition. Guilt indicates the judgment that God in maintaining His law and the claim of His love does address sin. Therefore sin really exists. Thus, there is not only a sense of guilt on our part – an awareness in which we could possibly be wrong – but guilt is a reality and there is a divine judgment. Guilt requires punishment, and therefore the next Lord's Day needs to treat guilt further.

The consequence of guilt is pollution or an internal and intrinsic corruption. Pelagianism considers sin as limited to the actual deed, and thus after a sinful deed the nature of man remains the same. For Pelagianism sin was always merely an action, which never became an behavior, and thus they accepted neither guilt nor corruption. However, in sin we have chosen the wrong path – away from God, and the judgment of God's love that expresses itself in guilt, now condemns us to persist in that wrong course. The guilt is thus also a curse of God, through which we now are no longer able to change direction. The corruption or the inclination toward sin is the consequence of the guilt. We are condemned to keep going in the wrong direction. There is therefore now a sort of inertia in us to continue in this wrong direction, and this inertia is the result of the guilt and of the curse. Paul writes of that law of inertia or the law of lethargy through which we no longer can change course, when he says: *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* (Rom.7:21,23). As long as the guilt is not atoned for, the power of sin cannot be removed.

All of this applied to Adam in the first place, for with him the fall into sin resulted in guilt and corruption. However, all of this also applies to the entire human race as well because he was the head of all, and everyone was reckoned in him. It is in this way then, that we speak of original sin. However, we need to distinguish here between original guilt and original corruption. That is not only something merely dogmatic, for we might be inclined to understand with original sin only original or inherited corruption. Nevertheless, this will never become a reality for us, and especially so if based on man's inclination toward God we would excuse ourselves – and we might even go further and accuse God – if the original sin were not seen in the first place as guilt and assigned to each of us as Adam's descendants.

We need to rise above individualism, for with individualistic contemplation we put ourselves on our own and then we can no longer understand our involvement in the collective guilt. In our own strength however, it is impossible to overcome individualism, for the result of the fall into sin was also that the human race was split apart and broken into splinters. The community of the covenant has become a commonality in the curse; and precisely this unity in the curse drives us apart and hinders us from being a spiritual unity. Thus, we live isolated lives from each other. We think in isolation, with the result that on our own we can never surpass individualism in order to come to the realization of our commonality in the guilt. Only by the Word and Spirit of the Lord can we begin to understand and admit what we by ourselves never could. However, we cannot comprehend and acknowledge this in a single moment; God must continually work in us with His Word and Spirit throughout our whole life so that our fellowship in the guilt increasingly becomes an actuality.

When this occurs, there is for us but one history of the whole human race. My history did not begin with my birth, but with the creation of Adam. Everything that happened since also involves me, and in Adam I am responsible for all things that took place since that time. All sin and all misery in the world touches me and proclaims my guilt. Thus my foolish separation of individualism is shattered, and I can no longer maintain my prideful isolation. The entire guilt of the world now also becomes my shared responsibility and accuses me.

That is what we understand with our original sin. This means in the first place and concretely my responsibility for the guilt of Adam, but then in Adam also the responsibility for the guilt of the world. The result of that original sin is original corruption – a compulsory persisting on the wrong path.

Semi-Pelagianism has been willing to accept original corruption but not original sin. However, it cannot really take original corruption seriously in that case. We have explained above how the original corruption, that compulsory pursuit of the wrong direction – that law of sin of which Paul speaks in Romans 7 – is the consequence of the guilt and of the curse of God. When people deny that curse, they cannot admit the necessity of continuing on the wrong course either. Thus, semi-Pelagianism has always maintained that in every instance, we of ourselves can always come back to God, or what is the same: that as we are, we can accept His offer of grace. This militates against the expressions of Scripture that *we were dead in transgressions* (Eph.2:5) and that *the sinful mind is hostile to God* (Rom. 8:7).

Of necessity, semi-Pelagianism produced confusing internal contradictions. It viewed original corruption as a person being a victim of heredity; but at the practical level it often encountered the impossibility of subduing or destroying it. When we see that the so-called ‘victim of heredity’ condition is the result of the communal guilt by which we are all afflicted, we would not merely concur with the impossibility of annihilating that original corruption in us, instead, we would want to cling to the Word of Scripture: *He Who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases* (Psalm 103:3).

Thus, we must concur that when we confess original sin as well as original corruption, we agree that our nature has been perverted in such a way *that we are all conceived and born in sin*. Our history is being dominated and controlled by sin from our very conception. Therefore, we do indeed see things one-sidedly: for we see a controlling force in our history, beginning at our conception – but now it is God’s grace. Moreover, we readily agree that matters as they are outside of Christ always mean a certain abstraction. Viewed then in that abstract way there is not be an hour of our existence (outside of Christ) that we are pleasing to God. Seen in this way there is for us nothing but wrath, and we would say with Paul: *like the rest, we were by nature children of wrath* (Eph. 2:3).

That means that by nature we are no longer children of God, no more children of His love. Being a child of God, as we pointed out, is the result of the fact that God adopted man to be His child. The creation of man in God’s image is related to this. When man from his side ruptured the fellowship with God, and God declared man guilty, His curse rested on him, and God’s relationship of Father to the man as His son was broken. Thus, we were no longer God’s children. Only when we by God through grace again have been adopted as His children, is that state of sonship restored.

The loss of sonship is related to the loss of the image of God. From what we said above concerning God’s image, it must follow that we can only speak of the loss of the image of God in a material sense. Man retained all of his functions however they may have been impaired. He remained a creature with his own responsibility. He lost his inclination toward God, and in this he lost God’s image in the material sense, that is, the knowledge of God, the righteousness, and the holiness. To whatever degree this image is still left in man today will be considered later. Presently we are presenting the matters as they needed to be in God’s condemning judgment. Because of the fall into sin we no longer reflect the glory of God, which comes to expression by the image of God in the material side in the knowledge of God, the righteousness, and the holiness. What we have retained of God’s image in the formal sense, thus in believing, in ethical life, in the sense of justice, in the consciousness of beauty, language, reason, feelings, etc., we use in a way to which God objects, and thus we become increasingly more corrupt.

### ***The Necessity of Regeneration***

With the last statement of this Lord’s Day, that *we are so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God*, several questions come to the fore. What do we understand with regeneration? Can we speak of the absolute depravity of man? Can unregenerated people also be called children of God? In unregenerated persons what is yet present of the image of God? We begin with the first question, even if we cannot yet fully treat regeneration here. This needs to be considered more completely with the seventh Lord’s Day.

By regeneration we understand a change of the heart, which results in the experience and pursuit of a transformed life, as believing people also practice this. In this last answer the catechism states that we are regenerated *by the Spirit of God*. With this is not denied what we read in Scripture: *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God. And this is the Word that was preached to you*

(1Pet.1:23,25). We distinguish a two-fold activity of the Spirit: a direct action in changing and opening the heart, and a working through the Word whereby the heart in believing reliance learns to give itself to the Lord. Thus we read: *One of those listening was a woman named Lydia...who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message* (Acts 16: 14).

That direct, immediate working of the Holy Spirit also needs careful consideration. Satan by his words has been able to alter hearts of people that were focused on God. It is inexplicable to us how a person who belonged to God has been able to listen to Satan's word and then turn away from God. And when he has turned away from Him, he can no longer listen to God's Word, and the things of the Spirit of God are now foolishness to him. God's Spirit now directly has to change and open his heart if he is to be able to listen to the Word of God again. With that direct working of the Spirit we indeed will be turned to God again, but by faith in God's Word we also on our own account turn to God. This last is also understood by and included in regeneration when Scripture speaks of being born again by God's Word.

When God works that way with His Spirit in any man, we may assume that He has looked at that person in Christ, forgiven his guilt, also the original guilt, and received him again as His child. Through that very rebirth the corruption of sin, also of original corruption – the wrong direction and the inevitable persistence on that pathway – in principle is taken away. Thus, there is through that regeneration in principle the annulment of original sin and its consequences. We are received again as children of God, and the image of God in the material sense – knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness – is restored in essence. We come to know God again in love, and through faith there is in principle once more a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. As Jesus said: *For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven* (Matt. 5:20). The response of a person to all that affects him is purified, and the Spirit of God wishes to entrust him again with control over his desires.

We must not see this rebirth of the elect as something by itself and thus apart from Christ. They are being engrafted into Christ, and this incorporation signifies their regeneration and develops it further. Without that incorporation in Christ, no conversion of any person is possible. In Christ as the new Head, the Head of the covenant of grace, and as the second Adam, God has provided the new principle for humanity.

All influence for the good of mankind proceeds from Christ as the new center, the new Head. This influence is intended especially for the elect, for in them through the incorporation into Christ the heart is again turned toward God. It remains a question, however, how far that influence works itself out in the non-elect, the not born again people. Because as long as they are in this life they live in some sort of organic association with the elect, since they with the elect form one humanity, the power of Christ must therefore in some measure effect them as well. Nevertheless, this cannot mean such a change that their heart is again turned toward God. However, the continuing impact of Christ's power in those who are not born again must be such that by it a certain association in humanity is possible.

Moreover, it does mean a certain alteration of the heart. Scripture states that *God changed Saul's heart* (1 Sam.10:9). Saul was self-centered, but then he learned to give himself to the people who were God's people. In this way there is in the non-elect persons still sort of a consideration of that connection and of the interests of that relationship, at least as they understand this matter. Through this, there is in all of them to a greater or lesser extent by the power of Christ, a certain restriction or limitation of the power of sin. A non-elected person, moreover, is not totally isolated, dependent on himself, or completely self-sufficient. This deterrent to complete isolation with respect to each other also means being prevented from complete isolation from God. Being interdependent as humans presumes a certain dependence on God, no matter how a person in disobedience to God's Word imagines Him.

There is therefore still a limited knowledge of God, and some sense of being dependent. Based on this, some people attempt righteousness in their own way: by granting each person his due, God as well as people. Moreover, they try to contain and control themselves and thus strive for a certain holiness. In all of this a few remnants of the image of God in its material sense may be recognized. Thus, there is a measure of knowledge and a certain service of God that remains even among unbelievers, and also with respect to religious convictions a certain kind of righteousness is present.

However, that does not mean that the heart of man is directed toward the living God. For unbelievers the sense and awareness of God as well as the knowledge of Him as He continuously reveals Himself in the works of His hands, is something entirely different from that of knowing God, which according to Scripture means eternal life, as Christ said: *Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent* (John 17:3). This knowing is a knowing by faith according to God's Word and a knowing in love. The knowledge and worship of God by unbelievers means a deformation of God's revelation by means of one's own insight and standard, and yet wishing to vindicate oneself before God. Thus, there is also a devotion to the fellowship of men as they see it for themselves, and not as God wills it and as He sheds light on this in His Word. Having control over oneself insofar as this exists does not happen by the power of believing in God's grace, nor does it take place in order to serve God by it, but rather to perfect oneself. In this way, there are among unbelievers particular influences of Christ, but the unbelieving heart notes this and uses it in its own spirit.

While we recognize these influences, it remains true that we are by nature unable to do any good – that is, any true spiritual good – in which we are serving God. In addition, we are *inclined to all evil*, even if that evil is not realized in every form due to the influences of Christ, for the evil is not conquered by the heart. Only when we are incorporated into Christ and regenerated, is there a working of God's Spirit and Word in us. By this the heart is conquered and again looks to God. In this way, the principle of the restoration of God's image is restored in us.

Only then there is the adoption as children of God. For the non-elect and those not born again, no matter what remnants of the image of God may be found in them, this is impossible. Thus, it cannot be said that all people are children of God. Only of those whom God again has adopted as His children and therefore granted regeneration is it possible to speak of them as children of God.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 4****9. But does not God do man an injustice by requiring in His law what man cannot do?**

*No, for God so created man that he was able to do it.  
But man, at the instigation of the devil,  
in deliberate disobedience robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts*

**10. Will God allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished?**

*Certainly not. He is terribly displeased with our original sin as well as our actual sins.  
Therefore He will punish them by a just judgment both now and eternally as He has declared:  
Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law,  
and do them (Galatians 3: 10).*

**11. But is God not also merciful?**

*God is indeed merciful, but He is also just.  
His justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished  
with the most severe, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul.*

***The Justice of God's Love Versus the Deliberations of Sinful Nature***

One could say that in this Lord's Day at least in the questions our flesh that is our sinful nature is speaking. For not only now but also throughout all centuries it has continually carried on a dialogue with God in finally seeking to justify itself over against Him. That is the sinful nature that never lets itself be cornered or captured but always comes up with some sort of response, or even better, knows how to devise yet another query. It always knows how to avoid the snare and to escape the threat of defeat. How consistently it maintains this is understood by everyone who knows himself well. What the catechism describes here takes place in everyone's life: wrestling with God in dialogue in which a person tries his best to keep God at arm's length. We can only say that over time the human race has become more adept and consistent in this, and that God's Word increasingly has difficulty breaking through this obstruction.

*But does not God do man an injustice by requiring in His law what man cannot do?* In practical terms this means that divine justice must adjust itself to the ability of man. That is, in connection with the history of the fall into sin, this meant that divine justice would need to consider the circumstances of man, and what he would want to make of his life. However, if divine justice needed to consider the yardstick of human ability in this, there would no longer be righteousness or justice with God. A person certainly must be audacious to deny God all rights in this manner. Nevertheless, that impudence is surely not lacking at present, and never has been absent. In that most principial question of whether divine justice exists beyond and above the given circumstance, we snub God's involvement. The human law as well as the criterion of his demands is exhausted with this quaint Dutch motto: *Whoever gives all he gained by his strife, is surely worthy of retaining his life.* With this then man has totally voided God's divine justice.

Imagine if with respect to this our sinful nature could be silenced and that it would recognize divine justice and acknowledge our guilt. Would our flesh then not have the courage to call upon and appeal to the sovereignty of God's justice in this way: knowing that divine justice is a free, sovereign determination of God, and that this justice obligates us in

all things while it obligates God to nothing? Moreover, is God not free whether or not to connect our guilt with the consequence of punishment? The following escape route of sinful nature is found in the second question: *Will God allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished?* The implication is clear: is it also possible that God would not assign punishment to the guilt? In this way the flesh once again tries to escape the burden of guilt, since guilt that is not followed up with punishment is not really guilt.

Imagine furthermore that we succeeded also to refute this argument of sinful nature. It would have yet a third idea on hand to safeguard a person against the judgment of God. It would in fact have the temerity to call upon the mercy of God Whose justice it actively opposes by attempting to declare a contradiction between God's mercy and His justice. And if need be, sinful nature would be prepared to accept this inner discrepancy in God, and declare His actions as absurd and deny God as God, rather than to surrender itself and its rights. Thus, sinful nature would ask the third question: *But is God not also merciful?*

What does the catechism present over against this three-fold reasoning that the flesh might construct? About this, we make the following comments in a general assessment of the present Lord's Day.

When our sinful nature reasons this way, we consider ourselves first of all detached from God and independent, and from that imagined position we construct entitlements for ourselves. Thus, it is only natural that we come into conflict with divine justice, since that whole supposed independence is a lie. Our life itself is founded on the justice God initiated, since man received this divine right at the time of creation even as we receive it at birth. From the very beginning, God has instituted and granted us the right of His covenant and through it, our existence was determined from that beginning. It is not as it might appear from the way the first question is phrased, namely that the peculiarity of our existence determines justice, but rather the other way around; it is justice that controls our life. Since now according to our sinful nature we can never think in any other way than from our own point of view, that is, after we have made ourselves free from God, and declared ourselves independent from Him, all our ideas about the right of our existence must be incorrect.

We can never learn anything concerning our actual judicial relationship with God except from God's revelation, which refutes all our sinful tendencies. Thus it cannot be the meaning of this Lord's Day merely to refute the sinful reasoning. Instead, the revelation of God's justice must cut through our sinful considerations, and make us discover again the divine justice as the foundation for our being. Then our earlier reasoning becomes foolishness in our eyes.

Moreover, we ought to remember that the judicial relationship in which God has placed man at his creation was a free, sovereign determination of God. However, God's sovereignty does not mean arbitrariness on His part. Thus, at one time He announced the consequences of violation in establishing the covenant, and now He binds Himself to the law of the covenant. In His sovereignty He does not dissociate Himself from His own works placing Himself above them, but by His sovereign design He has maintained Himself in His relationship with man according to the law of the covenant.

It is entirely useless and beyond the pale of our human existence and abilities, if we should ask whether a different relationship would have been possible between God and us. We cannot think differently than that based on the relationship established by God, if in fact we reason properly. Thus, it is also useless to ask if it would have been possible whether God might not have tied the resulting punishment to the transgression. Should we wish to do that, or if we would want to speak of a divine obligation, seeking to prove apart from God's established covenant relationship that He of necessity needed to punish sin, we would end up with a law to which God Himself would be subject. The result would be that we would want to explain God's actions from a law to which He was subject – seeking to understand God legally – and thus we would have some control over Him.

We cannot go beyond or behind the justice of His covenant on which our existence is based. On the one hand, we may not consider a law to which God Himself would be subject, and according to which law He would need to punish. On the other hand, we must not understand God's sovereignty as arbitrary so that there would not be a covenant law by which punishment is necessarily tied to the transgression.

In the third place, we must pay close attention to the fact that when we discuss God's justice, we are dealing with the justice of His love. We must not posit a contrast between divine justice and divine love, but neither must we insist on seeing the first division of the catechism as that of God's justice, while the second division would be the one dealing with God's love. At best, we can distinguish between them in this way, that the first part deals with the justice of His love and that the second part speaks of the love of His justice. God's justice never comes to us with genuine heart-crushing effect except when we see it as the just claim of His love. Only when we see it in this way does it bind us to an eternal judgment. With that, we have again said that we can never see nor agree with this justice of God that is specifically treated in this fourth Lord's Day except by faith, for only faith that has returned to God's love in Christ is able to see the justice of that love.

Thus nothing has really been taken away from the terror of God's justice. However, there is now a being tied to and pulled by His love while at the same time a being consumed in our sinful nature by His justice. That is also what Scripture says when it reveals to us that our God is a consuming fire. We begin to see and admit that *our God is a consuming fire* (Hebr.12:29) when by faith we have also learned to accept that He is *our* God. At the moment we realize that we have to do with the justice of His love, it begins to crush and devastate us in spirit.

We began this overview of the Lord's Day with the observation that at least in the questions the sinful flesh is heard. That was not intended to deny that in the entire catechism the believer is speaking as member of the body of Christ. It would be more accurate therefore to say that in all these questions the believer utters the considerations, which arise in him as a sinner. When faith in God through Christ leads us, we are prepared to have God's Word instruct and correct us.

### ***Demanding Love***

*But does not God do man an injustice by requiring in His law what man cannot do?* The reference here is to the demand of love. For the thought from which we proceed in this Lord's Day is really the right or the just claim of God's love. It is His love that demands everything.

Already that demand of His love is denied from many sides. Apparently the thought is in the minds of many that love only gives and that its nature in the highest sense is opposed to demanding. Immediately we think of the love of Christ, *Who having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love* (John 13: 1). These words about Christ also intend to say that He in His love gave everything without even placing any condition on those who were His own. The fact of the matter is, however, that in itself man's love does not have a single right or claim to love in response. When human love also can assert the right and claim of love in response, then it exists only because God has given it that right.

Because of God's will we are now also able to insist on a responding love in particular relationships, but then only because of God's will, since human love in itself has no rights. Using human love as a pattern, we tend to judge God's love as if His love also has no rights in itself to make demands. The result is that many think of God's love only as an all-giving love, and they will essentially have nothing to do with its demanding claim. By faith, we must again begin to realize clearly the rightful demands of God's love.

God has indeed given us all things in His love, and in this He has given Himself to us. However, in the measure He has given, in that measure He also demands; and thus He exacts of us all things – our entire heart. This affects us even more when the Scriptures reveal to us that God's love is in the first place a self-love. He loves us because of Himself, and because of Himself He gives us all things, in order that we should give Him all things. God's sovereignty determined this relationship of giving and demanding, and He established that entire relationship in His covenant.

Even the giving of a responding love was a stipulation for maintaining the covenant in which God had given Himself. This demand was made of Adam, and was fulfilled in completely different circumstances by Christ. Christ did give a love without condition to His own, but He did this so that He would fulfill the demand that God once made to man in His covenant. In this way He gave to God the obedience and the love that were once demanded of man.

Thus from the beginning our very life was constrained by that demand of love. That we can now no longer satisfy that requirement does not remove the claim or the right of that demand. Our very life is founded on that right of God, and this claim always retains its legitimacy, whatever may change in us. If we would say that God cannot make that demand of us because we are not able to comply, we would actually be placing the foundation of the divine right in our ability and not in God's disposition or decree. Nevertheless, His decision to give us a nature that could respond to His demand was in agreement with God's righteousness.

That does not mean, however, that God's justice was determined by the ability of our nature. Actually, the opposite is true: God determined our nature according to His justice and righteousness. It is the lie of subjectivism that reasons from out of itself, when they look for the standard of God's right and justice in the ability of man. Thereby they have completely turned the relationship around. In addition, it is the lie of historicism that looks for the norm of all things in their historical development when they hypothesize that the demand of divine right in history conforms to the line of human ability. The Dutch saying is well known and much loved: "where there is nothing the emperor loses his rights." In continuing this trend of thought, however, we would forfeit the absolute nature of justice.

God's righteousness in His sovereign determination, according to which He established the justice of His love in our very life, also entailed that man could persist in that relationship, and that this depended on his own decision to retain the ability to respond to the divine demand. When man now no longer has that ability, it must be the result of a gratuitous, reckless deed of man. He has brought himself in the position of having to do it and not being able. Through his wanton disobedience he has brought his own existence to be incongruous or absurd. We cannot blame that absurdity of the present condition on God, but we ourselves must assume responsibility for it. We need to completely disown the thought of placing responsibility for our incongruous condition on God. That responsibility must wholly fall upon us; and then our desire to tamper with the legitimacy of the claim of God's love vanishes.

The first answer places all the emphasis on that responsibility of man, that is, on his deliberate disobedience. At best one could object that Adam indeed did bear that responsibility, but not all of us. In fact, the previous Lord's Day already made mention of it. The intent would then be to suggest that through the splintering of the human race we are all born as individualists. From our very birth our thoughts would then begin to develop in a wrong direction due the nature with which we are born, and on account of which we take an individualistic approach to life. We cannot really maintain that although we are totally depraved, nevertheless our thinking is still pure and sound.

The starting point of our thoughts is wrong from the very beginning, because we proceed from ourselves in that we have isolated ourselves from God, as well as from the fellowship of the human race, and have placed ourselves on our own. As a result the entire development of our thinking is also wrong. God's revelation clashes with that whole thought pattern. It does not take issue with our thinking as such, but with our sinful views. The power of the Lord's Word and Spirit must take control of us, so that we again learn to think beginning with God and with the unity of the human race. Then we rise above our individualistic difficulties, and the objections that always arise from that individualistic point of view no longer bother us. Also our thinking about these things needs to be sanctified through the faith by which we returned to God; otherwise we would not be able to concur with the truth of this first answer.

Moreover, as has been noted, this answer does not intend to refute the objections of our sinful nature with considerations in the same vein. We must to take note especially of the positive tone of this answer. The intent of this is to confront and defeat the reasoning of the sinful nature with God's revelation. Therefore, the catechism does not refer here to Adam or to us, but to *man* – encompassing all humanity in its common responsibility in Adam. Following the example of this answer we also must not, motivated by the needs of a sort of apology, seek to meet the objections of the flesh. Against those considerations we need to place the testimony of the Word of God.

Man's responsibility is not reduced by the fact that he carried out his deliberately disobedient deed *at the instigation of the devil*. One can properly experience all kinds of external factors impinging upon us, without having one's own responsibility diluted in any way. All that is outside of us can be an inducement to sin, but the cause always lies within us. We may never consider such provocation as an excuse, for with logically consistent reasoning we might be able to deny

any responsibility. Instead, we must draw the sharpest possible line of demarcation between provocation and cause, and the one must never be confused with the other.

That in this context the answer adduces the instigation of the devil has a totally different purpose. Rather than serving as an excuse, it in fact more sharply highlights the guilt of the fall into sin. The man in his choice allowed himself to be led by someone like the devil! He preferred the satanic to the divine; the demonic appealed to him more than the truly spiritual. If there is anything in the world that exclaims our guilt, then certainly it is this. In one breath we say: *at the instigation of the devil* and *in deliberate disobedience*; for it was deliberate disobedience that opened man for the instigation of the devil.

Once more we need to say with respect to this answer that we do not find here the reasoning of the flesh refuting the considerations of our sinful nature. Here the starting point is God's declaration, which is a sovereign judicial decision, and behind and beyond which we must not look for explanations, for that divine determination is based on nothing but on God Himself. However, we will not come to the point of bowing before the justice of that determination unless we also at the same time see that Christ has satisfied God's justice. We tend to see misery and deliverance in one single glance, even if we are not always aware of this. If we do not also see and acknowledge that Christ has satisfied that justice, we will not admit that God's justice pursues and subdues us. Instead we would continue to resist our whole life, continually tamper with it, and prevent ourselves from seeing it as His demand, and agreeing to it. For those two, seeing and agreeing, are given together and interact with each other. We cannot accede to God's right and justice because we do not perceive it; but we also will not let ourselves see it because we are not prepared to agree with it. And as long as we have not understood that there is atonement and thus also escape, we are not able to agree with it. In the revelation of Jesus Christ we discover simultaneously God's justice and the satisfaction of that justice.

### ***Sovereign Determination***

The entire relationship of justice in which God has bound the world and mankind to Himself is indeed fully a sovereign arrangement. We need to start with and proceed from that divine intent. It has no purpose to ask if it would have been possible for God to have established an entirely different relationship between Him and His creatures. Our nature corresponded with the relationship that God created. Beyond that we cannot enter in our thinking, unless in pride we sin against God. Moreover, we need to see that God Himself also observes the mutual rights of the covenant in that relationship He once initiated. God's sovereignty means that there is no arbitrariness. In the beginning He announced that the violation of those rights would receive retribution. That threat of punishment also belonged to the establishment of the covenant. Now God observes and maintains what He once established.

This notice of punishment was intimately connected with the relationship that God established between Him and His creatures. It was a covenant relationship and thus a relationship of justice, since a covenant entails mutual rights and obligations. A legal relationship means that a violation or infringement incurs guilt, and guilt suggests an obligation of punishment – a duty to punish. The punishment is the sanction by which the right or the justice of the relationship is maintained. Thus, a relationship of justice as we know that from God's covenant initiation and revelation is unthinkable without the sanction of punishment in case of violation. We never say this in an absolute sense, for we function in our thinking within the framework of the relationship that God established.

Because our very existence is founded upon that relationship of justice, our life would not be possible if that justice faltered or failed. It is impossible that our life could be saved by putting aside the rights of the covenant. That justice takes place, is a condition for our very existence and therefore also for our deliverance. The assertion "justice must happen, even if the world perishes," can be maintained in a certain way. The world may perish eternally in the judgment of God's justice, but then justice would be maintained. In fact, should justice be abandoned the possibility of the existence of the creature would vanish with it. In satisfying the justice of His covenant through the suffering of Christ, God revealed His will for the deliverance of the world through maintaining His justice. In it God has spoken: Let there be justice in order that the world should be preserved!

We must not forget in this that the justice of His covenant is the justice of His love. In that relationship, God has been willing to give Himself wholly in His love to man. Therefore He does not judge unmoved and from far away, since His

judgment is that of His rejected love. Moreover, even as love does not exist without justice, neither can there be justice without love. Without love justice would not be justice but arbitrariness. In His judgment God Himself is involved. He judges with the deepest emotions of His heart. Thus the catechism can say that He is terribly angry and displeased with our sins. It may be worded somewhat paradoxically, but it is wonderful that God is so angry about sin. That shows how fully He has given Himself to man in that relationship. He bound Himself in love to His creatures because of who He is; and now when He judges, all within Him is moved. His love for Himself has demonstrated itself in His love for His creatures, and His justice with respect to His creatures has its basis in what God is in Himself. Therefore, as Scripture states, He certainly *does not leave the guilty unpunished* (Ex.34:7). The deepest dread in God's judgment lies herein that in His judgment He maintains Himself. The entire covenantal arrangement, after all, was not arbitrary but based on the love God has for Himself.

We define the punishment as retribution or appropriate sentence. It serves as restoration of the dishonored justice. When we consider that the violated justice was the just claim of His love, we do not think of arbitrariness in the punishment. Through that retribution God maintains Himself in the justice of His love. Should we deny such retribution, we would never again find God's love. Whatever some may say about the love of God apart from the acknowledgment of punishment is an invented and contrived idea – a fantasy. No one has ever approached God's love except that he in the crushing of his heart and spirit acknowledged the justice of God's sentence. We do not find God as **our** God, unless we meet Him as a consuming fire. We will have to learn to see and think radically differently than we do by nature. For then we will no longer think selfishly, having made ourselves independent from God, but instead we will always contemplate matters from the viewpoint of the justice of God's love.

When God exacts restitution according to the just claim of His rejected love, the principle is established that punishment must correspond to the misdeed in keeping with His justice in the initiation of His covenant. The punishment should be as great as the transgression. And thus there is an endless variation in the punishment. God's love is also in this respect not arbitrary, and no one will ever be able to complain about God's injustice to him. In judging, love considers even the most minute distinctions and takes all circumstances into consideration and thus the Scriptures speak of being struck with many blows.

In the Law of Moses the regulation that the punishment must equal the misdeed is expressed in these words, *eye for eye and tooth for tooth* (Ex.21:24, Lev.24:20, Deut.19:21). To appeal to the statement of Christ: *You have heard that it was said, Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth; but I tell you, do not resist an evil person* (Matt.5:38), cannot serve to deny that there is retribution with God. If one does this, the error is made to which we already referred, that the justice or right of divine love is measured according to that of human love. The fact of the matter is that human love in itself has no rights. The rights of human love are entirely based on and grounded in the divine right. If we independently would grant ourselves rights, and we would avenge these rights when violated, we would not be doing justice but an injustice.

Christ warns against that injustice. The revealed implementation of *eye for eye and tooth for tooth* was given for maintaining the divine justice among humans. However, people misuse it for upholding and defending their presumed personal rights. It is against this view that Christ protests. It is the upholding of God's justice alone that should be and must be done on earth, whatever the relationship may be. When we understand Christ's words in this way it is in agreement and harmony with the main theme of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Christ expounds that in all relationships we are not our own but God's.

### ***The Punishment of Sin***

Speaking in general, the punishment for sin is death. That means that we are robbed of the fellowship of God's love. Only in that fellowship are we able to live. However, we must make a distinction between existing and living. Those who have been rejected forever do continue to exist, but they do not live in the Scriptural sense of the word. Thus there is an inner contradiction in their existence. All people exist so that they would live in fellowship with God and therein find their purpose for life, while the lost exist without coming to the purpose of their life. They are forever consumed by that inner contradiction in their life.

In this way sin brought death. Every sin according to its own nature is a deadly sin. By it we through disobedience sever the fellowship with God, and according to the justice of God's covenant we inflict death upon ourselves as well. According to the justice of God's covenant man brings death upon himself. In this way we see the sentence as a natural punishment – a penalty that automatically flows from sin. We ourselves break fellowship with God and thus deprive ourselves of life. In all of this we must not forget that the punishment followed the sin because God had established His covenant with that law. Thus, there is not only something natural about the punishment, something that man does to himself, there is also something intentional from God's side in it. There is also a deed of His wrath in it according to the justice of His covenant. In this way on the one hand the punishment is natural, but on the other hand it is also indisputable.

We need to see this distinction especially in connection with the eternal punishment. The outer darkness – that is for ever to be forsaken by God – is what man desired for himself. He has not wanted God and remains therefore by his own desire eternally outside God's fellowship. Moreover, Scripture speaks of the eternal fire, which is the burning of God's anger. In it God displays His eternal wrath for the thwarted justice of His covenant. The horror in hell also reflects the justice of God's rejected love.

In all of this we see death as the eternal death happening to man in body and soul, revealing God's curse. To be cursed fundamentally means to have no true fellowship with God or His creatures. When we are cursed everything has turned against us and we are isolated, entirely alone. God announced that curse or sentence in the probationary command when He said: *for when you eat of it you will surely die* (Gen.2:17). Nevertheless, when the Lord after the fall into sin appeared to man, He immediately came to him in the grace of the covenant restored in Christ. Thus, further distinctions are needed immediately.

It is inaccurate to say that God suspended the punishment after the fall into sin. The threat of *when or in the day* was duly implemented. The bond of relationship between God and His creatures was destroyed by sin. In keeping with God's judgment, death in its full extent was present right away. That could not be otherwise since God had given His Word. At the same moment, however, God initiated His by grace restored covenant in Christ with the world that was slipping away from Him. For as had been determined, Christ would destroy death and bring about true life as well as immortality. Through Christ the bond of fellowship with God was restored.

In that covenant the world and the human race as a whole were saved. That does not mean that all persons would be redeemed, but that the organic unity of the world and man as head was restored in fellowship with God. Many however would be cut off as unfruitful branches, for Scripture says: *May sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more* (Ps.104:35).

That does not detract from the fact that also unbelievers share in the many blessings that are the fruit of the covenant of grace. Moreover, the consequences of the restored fellowship in believers are not immediately fully worked out. All of this means that the judgment God pronounced after the fall has an assorted character, and further distinctions are required.

The world and humanity as a whole are led back to fellowship with God. Believers thus receive eternal life through faith in Christ. For them eternal death has been defeated. By His deed expressed in the words: *I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers* (Gen.3:15), God severed the relationship between the human race He intended to save and Satan, and bound man eternally to Himself. Everything God says in addition to Adam is not a punishment in the sense of retribution, but a chastisement within the covenant of grace. That applies to His words that man would *return to the ground* (Gen.3:19), and thus to the so-called temporal death. For the redeemed man this natural life will not transform without catastrophe into eternal spiritual life, for the natural death that threatens constitutes God's judgment of retribution, so that we also through that would be delivered. This applies also to the judgment God specifically announced concerning the life of the woman and that of the man as well. In that punishment was grace, for through it man was to be driven even more to God. Therefore keeping the believers in mind, distinction must be made between the eternal and the temporal death.

For unbelievers the ultimate judgment is not immediate, due to the result of the grace that came to the entire world in Christ. They still live in the today of the grace that exists in Christ for the entire world. That does not mean that there is

personal grace for them, since the bond between God and their hearts remains broken. However, the consequences of eternal death are not yet fully evident in them. Therefore we speak concerning them of spiritual death in distinction from eternal death, which comes when God will pronounce judgment over them personally. We are also able to say that the elect who have not yet been raised to a new life by God are spiritually dead.

Noting these differences, we must not forget that God's punishment for sin was eternal death in keeping with the justice of His covenant. In that eternal death God maintains the rightful claim of His love, rejected by man. In this present world however His wrath and grace, His judgment and mercy interact. Thus the same events affect one person – a believer – as chastisement, and another – an unbeliever – as temporal judgment serving as prelude to eternal death.

This also applies to the disasters that happen to the whole world. The Lord said: *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life* (Gen.3:17). In this also the judgment of God is evident. The full and complete judgment, however, is countered by the grace of God in Christ that intervened immediately. There is now also a groaning of the whole creation through the Holy Spirit *for the liberation from its bondage to decay* (Rom. 8: 19-22). Nevertheless there continues to be a daily *wrath of God revealed from heaven* (Rom.1:18).

### ***Various Perspectives***

We should not be surprised that many objections have been registered against the confession of eternal punishment. We view human life from our perspective and are limited in our knowledge and understanding, and therefore that awful reality as revealed by Scripture often does not penetrate our consciousness. Moreover, our mind frequently refuses to enter into that realm of thought. It is also impossible to do this continually and on a daily basis. In fact, there are many things in Scripture that we cannot absorb. In eternal punishment we deal with the anger of God about His scorned and rejected love. While we cannot fathom God in His love, we cannot understand His wrath either. Nevertheless, in this subject as in all others we need to submit to God's revelation.

Over time essentially three different concepts have replaced the confession of eternal penalty. *Hypothetical universalism* accepts that after death there will be opportunity for conversion, and thus the possibility exists that everyone will repent and be saved. *Absolute universalism* asserts with certitude that all creatures, not merely people but also devils, will be saved at some time. The teaching of so-called *conditional immortality* defends the idea that after death and the final judgment only believers will continue to live, while unbelievers will be annihilated and cease to exist.

Those three ways in which people attempt to circumvent the difficulty, reflect the smallness of these human concepts when compared and contrasted with the authoritative force of God's revelation. In these efforts one again finds something of man's desire to consider the realm of God's revelation from his own biased perspective.

The most important argument with which men attempt to dispute the Scriptural content of the confession of eternal punishment is the word ***eternal*** in Scripture, which both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament – thus the Hebrew word as well as the Greek – does not always have the meaning we attach to it. In itself, of course, this is completely accurate, for one only has to think of the expression *everlasting doors* in Psalm 24: 9 (NKJ) for the age-old gates of the fortress of Jerusalem. However, when Christ, our merciful High Priest says: *Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life* (Matt.25:46), the word ***eternal*** must have the same meaning in both instances. One can also think of expressions such as *where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched* (Mark 9:48). In light of such expressions, as well as of this text: *They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power* (2 Thess.2:9), we may not interpret the revelation of Scripture in any other way than as indicating eternal punishment.

Hypothetical universalism in addition denies the revelation of Scripture, that with death the determination is final for us, since *man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment* (Hebr.9:27). Absolute universalism neglects the revelation that in the final judgment separation will be made between those placed on Christ's right hand and those on His left (Matt.25:31-46).

The teaching of the so-called conditional immortality has gained the broadest dissemination especially in sectarian circles, which is not surprising. For in it a solution is offered for the inner contradiction present in an unbeliever's existence on earth that does not come to full development. The fact is that such an existence cannot really be called living because it is not a life with God. In that inner contradiction, however, there is something of the victory of God's judgment of an existence that found its origin in God's love and that refused the fellowship of that love.

On this issue we may not allow human sentiments opposed to God's revelation to hold sway. Who are we that we would assess the measure of His love, and the intensity of the anger of His love? Someone might respond to us and say that man is no 'match' for God since we are too insignificant and too small for Him to pour out His anger on humans in this way. However, we should never forget how highly God elevated man in His covenant, in that He was prepared to treat him as His friend, and that God insisted that man should answer His love in a way that truly was a response. If one would want to criticize eternal punishment, he would need to consider and visualize the covenant relationship fully, and in it occupy the place of God and understand what in that relationship our sins did to His love. Since we are not in the place of God and certainly lack qualifications and ability, we shall have to submit to God's revelation, which also on this topic exceeds our understanding.

Moreover, we should consider also that this revelation leads us to conversion. If we would not yield to this just claim of His love, we could never understand His love itself. It is remarkable that especially through belief in the frightening reality of eternal judgment we discover the essence of His love. There is no other way. Whoever would invalidate Scripture on this subject would make all of God's revelation powerless.

### ***The Living God – No Abstraction***

Our point of departure in the discussion of this Lord's Day has consistently been the relationship in which God from the very beginning has placed man to Himself: that of covenant relationship. It serves no purpose to ask whether any other relationship might have been possible. We can know God only in this relationship. We cannot ask what God is like in Himself outside of that relationship to us. Since we have been placed in this relationship, existence apart from it is unthinkable; in fact, the entire revelation that God gives of Himself presupposes that relationship.

That does not prohibit the fact that we truly know God. We do not merely know a relationship, but we know God in that relationship. In it we interact with and relate to God. Moreover, also in that sense the relationship between God and man is not an arbitrary one, as though God might not have given Himself and that somehow all of this took place while His heart was not in it. Scripture tells us how much God Himself is involved, when it relates all the emotions of anger, mercy, longsuffering, sorrow, and pity that God displays. In that relationship we truly know God Himself. Evidently that relationship fully coincides with God's own nature and reflects it.

In this way the catechism is able to speak in the last answer about God's mercy and justice. That is, about God as He gives Himself in His mercy and justice to us; for His attributes or virtues never exist in abstraction. One immediately feels a certain reservation when speaking about God's attributes. And it does seem a bit like an abstract reflection. However, we cannot really think of His virtues or attributes apart from God Himself, for He cannot be separated from them. God **is** His attributes. Thus, God does not merely *have* mercy and justice, but He is the Merciful One and the Just One. In each of His attributes or characteristics we always meet God Himself, and all of God. All of these attributes are specific dimensions of His revelation in the relationship in which He has been prepared to place Himself to us and us to Him.

Our entire redemption consists herein, that we once again have to deal with God Himself, and that we have abandoned all futile abstractions. If we were to believe that a revelation of God's mercy is possible without Him revealing with it and at the same time His justice, we have made an abstraction of God's mercy. When we deal with the living God in His mercy, we meet Him Who at the same time is the Righteous One. And in all of it we must want to deal with God Himself, however much His justice might frighten us. We must not be satisfied with an abstraction even though our sinful nature fears meeting God and gladly takes refuge in abstractions. It is often difficult for us to have the Word of the living God become a reality. In fact, we even tend to make that Word as something theoretical and abstract. It is precisely this that

should be prevented, since Scripture designates God Himself as the eternal Word. In the Word of His virtues and attributes we must meet God.

Then there is no possibility of questioning that our life would be able to stand in the light of His mercy, and also at the same time before His justice. And we would not wish to do that either any more when through faith we receive God's Word, for if we would not see God's justice at the same time, we would not see God and would not have been redeemed.

It is idle speculation captivating many, that if we would hope for God's mercy in such a way that in granting it, He would annul and call off His justice. Or it would be even worse, if we were to believe that there had been sort of a struggle within God between His mercy and His justice, and that His love had overcome His justice. Sinful nature has dared to view God as divided against Himself; even though the Lord Jesus Christ rejects that by saying that *every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and every city or household divided against itself will not stand* (Matt.12:25). God's oneness entails the continuing harmony between His mercy and His justice. To plead His mercy at the expense of His justice is to offend God's glory.

In such a scenario it would be much more consistent to lapse into believing that there are two gods, a god of righteousness and a god of love, as indeed has happened in the history of the church. The god of love would be unknown to this world that is based on justice; and the disclosing of a god of love would then undermine the god of justice.

In our day likely no one in the Christian church would believe this heresy, and yet it appears difficult for us to accept and to live believing that the God of love is the same as the God of justice. Apparently for us there continues to be a certain tension between those two. For the Christian church that tension has not yet been overcome. With respect to the first division of the catechism, the part of our misery, it remains necessary to say with considerable emphasis that in His anger God reveals the justice of His love. In the same way with the third division, the section of our gratitude, we learn that in dealing with the law as a guide for thankfulness, it still needs to be defended that the commandments convey to us the justice and regulations of His love.

The revelation of the cross of Christ alone brings a resolution for that tension. In it faith views the unity of justice and love. In that reconciliation through Christ God has demonstrated at the same time His justice and love. The Servant of the Lord has come *and He will bring justice to the nations* (Isa.42:1). He has done that especially on the cross, and in His atoning suffering He has revealed the just claim God's love had on us. In that way, moreover, He also brought God's love to us again.

Only through faith in the cross of Christ can we confess what the catechism says in the last sentence: *God is indeed merciful, but He is also just. His justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul.* We must be careful, however, not to read this sentence as the reasoning by which a person would attempt to persuade another, without faith, of the justice of God's judgment! Faith – that is, faith in God through Christ – has returned to God's love and understands also the magnificence of His love. It has seen its majesty at the cross. There faith has learned to concede the justice of God's verdict. Sin against that love in its splendor is sentenced with eternal punishment of body and soul, and means that God's judgment applies against man in his entire existence, and continues without end. Faith grants that the guilt of sin against that majesty could never ever be fully paid, not even through suffering.

Nevertheless, how often do we not measure the justice of God's love with that of our own! We never have the right to avenge ourselves when our love is insulted. Scripture tells us: do not avenge yourself! From this we conclude therefore that it would be unworthy of God to avenge Himself. It is with this as it is with other things that Scripture tells us, namely that God does all things according to His own will. If we were to do that it would be sinful egoism because the origin of our existence is in God, and thus we must do all things for His sake, according to His will. For God however, Who is His own eternal origin and cause, it is not possible to think in any other way than that in everything He does He involves Himself. To do everything in conformity with the purpose of His own will is worthy of God alone.

Thus Scripture forbids us to avenge ourselves. Only the divine right may and must be avenged, sometimes also through us. That God avenges Himself because His love is thwarted is also worthy only of God. By faith we need to affirm that God in His love and in the justice of His love observes and approves. Immediately we connect this with the other thought, that only in maintaining the right of that love can the world exist, since it is based on it. Moreover, it is in our acknowledgment of its judgment that we come to discover that love. That love would not be so blessed if it could not be so angry and if it could not sentence all who disown it.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 5**

**12. Since, according to God's righteous judgment we deserve temporal and eternal punishment, how can we escape this punishment and be again received into favor?**

*God demands that His justice be satisfied. Therefore, we must make full payment, either by ourselves or through another.*

**13. Can we by ourselves make this payment?**

*Certainly not. On the contrary, we daily increase our debt.*

**14. Can any mere creature pay for us?**

*No. In the first place, God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed. Furthermore, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it.*

**15. What kind of mediator and deliverer must we seek?**

*One who is a true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures; that is, One who is at the same time true God.*

***The Intent of Redemption***

Redemption proceeded from God's sovereign determination. It is with the redemption of the world as it is with its creation: it finds its origin in God's sovereign will. Just as God was coerced by nothing to bring the world into being, so also after its fall He was not compelled by anything to redeem it. He could have left the world and humanity in their ruin. In His sovereign free will He again turned to them in love.

However, concerning this it needs to be noted that in God's single decree the creation of the world as well as its redemption was taken up. It was intolerable that God's work in its totality would perish in His judgment. The purpose of God's creating, namely that He would receive a response to His love from His creatures, must certainly be attained. Thus, the redemption of the world was firmly anchored in His decree. That did not take away that He sovereignly determined such redemption. There was nothing in what was created which obligated Him to this redemption. The bond of love between Him and His creatures was severed completely by sin and thus God and His creatures faced each other in unmitigated alienation.

In His sovereign good pleasure – the only reason we are able to glorify Him – He has in His searching love again turned to His creatures. In the beginning by His eternal Word He had said all He desired to be for man. In that eternal Word He again willed to be the Same One to His creatures. The fall into sin has not altered anything in this, namely that what He desired to be for His creatures, He would give them in His eternal Word. Thus it is written in John 1 that both before and after the fall into sin the eternal Word was the life, and *that life was the light of men* (John 1:4).

This meant that the broken covenant was restored by God. And that also was a deed of God's sovereign good pleasure. Even as He once unilaterally had initiated the covenant, thus also it was restored by an act that unilaterally issued from

Him. The covenant of grace after the fall therefore means a restoration of the covenant of favor that existed before the fall. However, what God now gave in that covenant was forfeited favor or grace.

Adam as head of the covenant of God's favor had made himself unworthy in his position as head. Never again could he assume the headship of humanity, because its head would now from the depths to which man had fallen have to ascend to fellowship with God. For this purpose Christ, the incarnate Word, has been given as the Head of mankind by God. Initially man's blessedness resided in the eternal Word and in the fellowship between that Word and Adam. However, in the covenant of grace man's salvation is only in the eternal Word, Who acted as the second Adam and as Head. In that Head mankind's salvation is secured unalterably. That Head also was able to return it to God's fellowship.

Under that Head humanity needed to be restored in its unity, and first of all in such a way that it was included covenantally into that Head by God, but also that through the renewing of the Spirit all members again learned to live one life with that Head. This restoration of mankind occurred discriminatingly, so that not all men were restored to fellowship with that Head. When God again turned in His sovereign love to mankind He directed that love to those whom He, also sovereignly, had elected thereto and whom He included in the covenant with Christ.

This full intent of redemption is only in principle revealed in the mother promise. However, God has revealed so much more in the passing of time! Progressively God's people developed greater receptivity for His revelation. Even today we are straining to understand all of it. We long to see God's work in redemption and to think His thoughts after Him.

We must not abandon this, for if faith should ever stay with elementary principles it would no longer be faith. Faith cannot as it were congeal, for it constantly struggles to view God's love in greater depth and splendor. That means not only that we long to see the evidence of that love continually new in our own life – and for the struggle of our faith that surely is an important feature – but behind all this abundance of God's love in our life, faith increasingly directs us to its source. Whoever only looks at the evidences of God's love in his life, will in the long run lose the fresh and ever new quality of faith. Faith desires to see both ends of God's love: the One from Whom it goes out, as well as our life into which it came, but especially the starting point. It is clear that Augustine's words have that intent: *I believe in order that I may understand*. He wanted to comprehend God's love through faith ever more fully, as well as understand its ways.

Thus, the catechism also enables us in this Lord's Day and the next to reflect on the works of God's redeeming love. That means therefore contemplation by faith. Some have accused the catechism of a scholastic methodology in both these Lord's Days. Scholasticism wants to submit God to human calculation, so that one no longer needs faith in God's revelation in His Word. In that way faith merely had a temporary significance, and only as a necessity as long as man did not understand. Once man has proven rationally that salvation must come in a particular way, he accepts such redemption on his own, and faith in God's Word is no longer necessary. Scholasticism thus uses reason and proof in the place of faith.

When the catechism in these divisions asks, *What kind of mediator and deliverer must we seek?* or, *Why must He be a true and righteous man?* or, *Why must He at the same time be true God?* it creates in some minds the impression that here the method of scholasticism seeks to establish proof so that faith can be pushed aside. However, the confession actually intends to proceed in the spirit of Augustine: it is faith that is seeking greater understanding. Thus faith is never discarded, but since it is faith alone that can understand God's revelation in His Word, it constantly occupies itself with studying that revelation.

In general, we must reject every effort to supplement God's revelation in His Word with rational evidence from nature. For then we would turn around the true relations. What we by ourselves think we understand from nature, must surely not be the norm for our thinking to which we would then try to accommodate God's revelation of His Word as much as possible. The opposite is the case: God's Spirit wants to control our minds through His Word, and with the enlightenment of that Word we must then also understand nature.

If we understand the spirit of the catechism in these Lord's Days properly, our attitude remains one of faithful submission to God's revelation of His Word. In that approach we attempt to understand God's wonder of redemption in Christ. Thus when the catechism asks, *What kind of mediator and deliverer must we seek?* it means that we do not start the search in

ourselves. Rather, it is a searching in which we are illumined by the Word and Spirit of the Lord. The Mediator is revealed to us by the Word and through faith, yet we search for Him constantly and increasingly in the Word through that faith. That means a searching, not only as an idle game of our minds, but a quest of our hearts.

When we wish to understand God's revelation in Jesus Christ better, it is not merely a matter of clarifying our concepts, even though they are faith concepts, but it is especially an issue of coming ever closer to Christ and to grow in His fellowship. Therefore reflecting on His revelation is not without value. In fact, it is of great value even if such reflection is not everything. We cannot reflect in faith on God's revelation of His Word if our entire heart and our total life are not involved in it.

### *Satisfying the Justice of God's Love*

Is there any means whereby we would be able to *escape this punishment and be again received into favor*? When there is talk here of **again** coming into favor, the focus in *favor* is on the situation of man before the fall. Favor is meant in the general sense of favor, and not in the particular meaning of forfeited or debt-forgiving grace. Thus: Is there any means to turn back to the favor that we have squandered because of our sin?

We are reminded here of the favor which originally was given us in the covenant of God's favor. The issue is, apparently, to return to that favor. When that intent is the priority, it is always the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work and is always present in principle as faith. Through faith we then have seen something of the glory of God's favor that we forfeited and to which we wish to return.

The desire for self-preservation is not exclusively at issue here: *How can we escape this punishment and be again received into favor*? When we read the sentence as it were in one breath, it is clear that the words are not the expression of the natural urge for self-preservation. In fact, sinful nature has not seen the glory of God's favor and does not desire to return to that favor. The natural urge for self-preservation leads us to something different than looking for God's favor. It brings us instead to a fleeing from God in the way Adam did after the fall.

That does not mean, however, that the desire for self-preservation is not involved in searching for the Lord, and that therefore in preaching the gospel it may not be used as stimulus. The urgency in *hurry for the sake of your life!* has a certain value in preaching. Yet it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work when we view that self-preservation not outside of God, but in the return to His favor. That return and the salvation of our own life are bound up together only through faith.

It requires great care to use the drive for self-preservation in preaching as a means to press the pursuit of salvation. Frequently the use of that incentive produces the opposite result, and people hide themselves from the living God. A lot has to happen to a person before he believes that the preservation of his life lies in the acceptance of God's judgment over his life! For surely the return to God's favor means the acceptance of God's judgment over our faithless forsaking of that favor.

Thus we need to be rather careful with the words: *How can we escape this punishment*, and we must not dissociate them from the next: *and be again received into favor*. Should we merely concentrate on escaping the punishment, it would be evidence that we would consider the punitive measure not righteous and just, and nonessential as the just claim of God's love. Whoever truly wishes salvation, that is, whoever really wants to find God again, also desires that the claim of God's love must be satisfied. Such a person cannot be content if he could escape the punishment in any other way. He wants to return reconciled to God. To escape the punishment certainly does not mean that one does not come into judgment with God and does not acknowledge the legitimate, just claim of His judgment.

The words *How then can we escape this punishment* must not militate against what is granted at the beginning: *Since according to God's righteous judgment we deserve temporal and eternal punishment*. From that judgment we would never wish to escape without further provision. John the Baptist already warned against such a blatant attempt to escape punishment in the Day of Judgment which, he announced, would come with the kingdom of grace. When he saw many of

the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them *Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* (Matt.3:7). His baptism was not a means intended merely to escape the punishment.

That such intent may never be our motivation is also clear from the seemingly cool and reserved answer: *God demands that His justice be satisfied.* In reality, however, the answer is not at all cool and reserved. It is the answer that faith expects and wishes. By faith we will return to God's favor and love; and this can never happen if that love has not received its rightful due and has not been reconciled in that way and thus again is able to give itself to us. It is an irresponsible playing with God's love, if one were to expect that a return to that love is possible without atonement. It is not a harsh reality that we would rather deny or avoid, namely, that no reconciliation is possible without atonement. Whoever truly sees the vast expanse and all-encompassing nature of God's love knows no other possibility and wishes for none. When we understand that all is grounded in God's love, we hear the words with fright yet also with joy: *God demands that His justice be satisfied,* and we would then never approach His love and not include His justice.

What also needs our undivided attention is that His love has its just claim and demands satisfaction, and then for us the Pharisaical manner of satisfying God's justice will never have any attraction. The Pharisees, just like many non-Christian religions, have attempted to buy favor with a particular conduct or activity. Sinful flesh can never view the relationship of man to God other than that of buying and receiving by means of a purchase. The flesh does not know the value of God's covenant, in which God first gave Himself to us and wherein we as answer give ourselves to Him. Cain did not give himself to God in the covenant; yet he tried to purchase God's favor with his sacrifice. Abel's offering was a sign of his self-surrender to the Lord as an answer to the love that God had given to him.

This purchasing is then a buying with some external practices and actions, but in doing this one has not known God's love and the justice of His love; for to respond to His love one can only give himself and then completely. Pharisaism claims to be able to seek justice without love. But when one rejects Pharisaism and places over against this one's love without justice, one has not progressed. The love of God has its justice or rightful claim in this, that in response we give ourselves in reciprocal love to His love. When what is at issue is to reconcile God's love with us, it can never be accomplished by a few activities, but we must surrender ourselves completely to the judgment of His love. That such judgment would consume us and that Christ has given Himself in our place for this, will be discussed later. Now it is established that we are to submit and surrender ourselves if there is to be any reconciliation by God's love.

Therefore we must be careful with the word *payment* in the expression *Therefore we must make full payment, either by ourselves or through another.* Conceivably the word, though it is Scriptural, raises the idea that the matter can be settled with some accomplishments, and the thought placed in the background that the devotion of our whole heart and our entire life is essential in reconciliation. We have to remember that a metaphor points to reality, and we may not let our idea of reality be controlled by the image. Reconciliation with God is not susceptible to being captured by the image of a particular transaction or of a purchase, since for such a purpose reconciliation is too awesome and encompasses all of our life.

This *payment* must bring about a return to God's favor. By this, not only the violated right of God's love must be reconciled so that we may surrender ourselves to the judgment of that love, but also that we may again stand before God in obedience and give Him our love in return, which is what He has demanded. Thus the issue is not at all that we want to escape the punishment, but rather what consumes us is our desire to return to God's favor.

### ***The Substitution of Christ Our Head***

When we fail to keep God's covenant in mind, the reasoning of the answer: *Therefore we must make full payment, either by ourselves or through another* appears wrong. It is noted properly here that the guilt which is the result of an offence cannot be transferred to another, and that the other cannot undergo the punishment for the transgressor. Scripture confirms that in the words *The soul that sins shall die* (Ezek.18:4). With respect to a financial debt it may be possible that another assumes the liability, but with a moral debt that is impossible. In addition, in this respect the metaphor may make us lose sight of the reality.

Concerning the objections brought against the transfer of our guilt upon Christ, the answer is inadequate should one point to the righteousness of Christ and to His right to control and dispose of His own life. One could further adduce the difference between Christ and every other person, in that all others are guilty and thus unworthy to appear in the judgment for anyone else, whereas Christ is righteous and worthy to stand up for us. It is also possible that one were to point to the fact that no one has life from himself and thus not a single person can dispose of or arrange his own life, while Christ has assumed human life voluntarily and thus is able to offer it for others. With all of that, we have not yet demonstrated that the guilt of the one can in fact be assumed by another, and that someone else can suffer punishment in place of the sinner.

For here we have to do with the substitution of Christ; with the surety character of His life and death. If we forget the backdrop of God's covenant, we stand here before an insoluble riddle. It is not about whether *another* in the sense of an arbitrary other person, assumes our debt. That would indeed be impossible, for in that connection the rule applies: *The soul who sins is the one who will die* (Ezek.18:20). Instead, the thought must be about the head who acts on behalf of an entire people whom he represents, and who are as it were taken up in him. That he can act as head and representative of that nation is related to his official position. It is in such a way that the head of a particular municipality speaks and acts for all of its citizens. In a similar fashion the head of a particular community is capable of acting on behalf of that group's debt. Christ does not act as an arbitrary other, but as our Head, and on our behalf. Only in this way is the substitution possible and conceivable. This possibility is also provided in the law of the covenant.

It is not accidental that when the Lord's covenant is forgotten the result is that the confession of the substitution of Christ, the assumption and atonement of our debt by Him begin to waver. There are indeed numerous Scriptural considerations about His life and death that one can present. Christ descended in His suffering and death to the depths where we were, in order to seize our hand and bring us back to God. This thought is perfectly correct. How could we understand the suffering of Christ, if we did not see that aspect? We can in addition focus on the mystical bond between Christ and us as Head and members of one body, and then confess that we died with Him and rose with Him. The catechism states that thought several times in other contexts. We are able to confess with Scripture that Christ has conquered Satan, and that He overcame death. We can also maintain that Christ was an example for us in His life and death.

All these considerations are Scriptural. However, they are devoid of their background, and will eventually be undermined if the confession of the substitution, of the guarantor or surety nature of Christ's life and death does not occupy the central place. It is thus not possible to maintain that substitution when one forgets God's covenant wherein the Head functions for all the people and the guilt of the head Adam is reckoned to all mankind, and the guilt of all people to the Head Christ.

In His covenant God does not deal with individual people in the first place, but He deals first of all with the unity of people in the Head of that community, and then with each person as a member of that fellowship. It would be possible from this to deduce an answer to the question of whether we can pay for ourselves. What would it benefit if each person satisfied for himself and we would no longer function as a fellowship before God? Surely that also was a consequence of the fall, namely, that humanity was rent asunder, and that each person is left to fend for himself. Of course, everyone is placed before the demand, *Do this and you shall live!* However, we would then again have to establish a fellowship because each person would have to pay for himself. That entire path has been cut off by our death. Therefore, from His side God has followed a different course in that He in His restored covenant took us up again in one Head, and gave that Head to be the surety for our debt.

When we see the substitution of Christ in this way, we become somewhat careful to point to parallels with the realm of the pagans in this connection. Nevertheless, there was among pagans often the idea that the sacrificial animal was a substitute as well as an attempt to buy the favor of the gods. What a degenerate idea! One separate sacrifice was to satisfy for each individual person. That hardly compares with Christ's substitution in anything. Of course, there were in Israel also individual sacrifices. The significance of these, however, was that they were related to and unified in the one offering for the people on the great Day of Atonement. All those sacrifices could not suffice, but were to create a longing for the one true sacrifice that the Head of the people would bring in His death.

Contained in the idea of the substitution in those sacrifices is a shadow of the substitution of Christ. This came to expression in the ceremonial sacrifices when the person whose sacrifice was offered placed his hands on the head of the animal (Lev.16:21). God's revelation must lead Israel further however as is seen especially in Isaiah, where it is said that the Servant of the Lord *was pierced for our transgressions*, and that *the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him* (Isa.53:5).

Thus we are here already considering in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, that it does indeed teach the substitution of Christ and His satisfaction in our place. This vicarious satisfaction is not something that appears in Scripture only here and there, and thus we would have difficulty to deduce it. In fact, Scripture constantly places the surety and guaranteeing aspect of Christ's work in the foreground. It does this in connection with the covenant, the sole context in which such substitution is possible. In the Old Testament we already adduced one of the most important features in the ceremonial sacrifices as well as Isaiah 53.

With respect to the New Testament, we point to the saying of Christ in Matthew 20:28: *Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many*. That He gave His soul a **ransom** for many means that He gave His life as a payment for many. Moreover, Paul writes that *God made Him Who had no sin to be sin for us, in order that in Him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Cor.5:21). It does not merely say here that our sins were placed on Him, but it expresses in the strongest manner that He was made sin for our sake. We would have to neglect not only a few places in Scripture, but also we would have to put aside Scripture's constant teaching if we should not accept the substitutionary satisfaction of Christ. It is thus possible to explain the wavering of the Christian Church concerning the confession of Christ's satisfaction in our place from the fact that she no longer understands the covenant, and also that she no longer accepts the Scriptures as the Word of the covenant.

When by faith we accept the satisfaction of Christ in our place as the satisfaction of our Head, it does not mean that we shift our guilt and responsibility to Him. All too readily and unscripturally one could imagine the matter and say, It is true that I sinned, but Christ has paid for me and now I get off free. Faith is never a mathematical calculation. The peculiar formulation of the first answer: *Therefore, we must make full payment, either by ourselves or through another* needs our attention in this context. The answer does not say that another must pay, but that we must pay through another. That is only possible because of the special relationship between the members and the Head in the covenant. Incorporated into Christ, we have paid through Him. We were in Him when He stretched out His arms on the cross, and in Him we have our hands stretched out to the suffering of the curse.

This determines also our attitude of faith with respect to these matters. Here is no shifting of our responsibility onto Christ, but rather a bearing of our responsibility in Christ, our Head. That is only possible in that relationship between members and Head. When we reflect on this, it is a matter of a daily self-accusation that our Head needed to suffer all that for us. That suffering involves us directly since we suffered it in Him. He was in the judgment of God for our sake, and now that we are included in Him it means that we are constantly in judgment with God. In the most profound way possible our responsibility now confronts us: We have necessitated that judgment of our Head! We confess this when we sing,

*What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners gain.  
Mine, mine was the transgression, but Thine the deadly pain.*

Faith in Christ means a perpetual entering into judgment with God, for this is to die in Christ in order to live through Him. Rather than dismiss our responsibility, faith in Christ is knowledge of the greatest responsibility. We will never really reach the knowledge of our full accountability before God, nor will we come to true acknowledgment when we constantly and fearfully retreat from such acceptance – unless we approach this in Christ.

***There Was No One to Help***

God would not have restored the covenant with Christ as our Head, should He concerning the covenant as He established it with Adam have had expectations in any other way. That God gave His only begotten Son for the redemption of the world so that the Word would become flesh, demonstrates that every other expectation from man was cut off.

It is true that when the covenant with Adam as head of humanity was broken by him and mankind splintered in its unity as a result, the demand came to every individual to atone for himself. The demand confronted each person to satisfy the wrath of God's love and to respond in kind to that love. It was thus that he would be able to elevate himself to the fellowship of God's covenant. This task was impossible for man to accomplish because he lacked both the ability and the will to do so. Who could ever cling to God's love when that love only exuded wrath, repulsion, and rejection? Who would have the capability and capacity to bear that wrath and still continue to love? Such an ability is beyond any human being.

Moreover, man fails to have the will for this. Through his sin he has turned away from God in the direction taken by his heart and life; and he will persist to do so as a result of the law of inertia. Everything man does, no matter how well it appears to be intentioned, and no matter with how much idealism it is undertaken, will always move him further from God. In addition, the idealism with which we pursue our self-defined ideals is godless for it in essence does not submit to the law of the covenant. We increase our debt daily.

We do attempt with respect to our own life to come clean and do the right thing. As long as possible we keep up the effort to atone for ourselves and to make reparation. We do not want to give up the wish to be independent. That does mean, however, that we satisfy a standard we ourselves have set, and do not comply with God's justice, for we do not see that just claim since we do not want to see it. For ourselves personally we wish to save our life and to make it worthwhile in keeping with that innate insight by which we measure life's value. It takes an immense effort – and it is by nature impossible – to give up our isolated position of being self-sufficient. Yet that is precisely what we must do with respect to Christ.

It is in this respect that we need to apply to our own life the statement that we cannot make this payment by ourselves, but *on the contrary, we daily increase our debt*. When the catechism says this, it needs to be the expression of our innermost self. We must be finished with what we by ourselves are able and attempt to do. It is like the experience of someone who walks in a forest and whose view is obstructed by the trees and the foliage. It is only when the last row of trees has been passed that the vista of an unimpeded vision presents itself. In similar fashion we must be beyond what is in us when we wish to focus on Christ. Giving up our secluded isolation can never mean when it concerns the satisfaction of God's justice, that Christ and we have something to give each other. Abandoning our segregation with respect to Him as it relates to God's justice is possible only when He is all and we are nothing.

Christ is not what He is sometimes called: a supply surety, that is, a guarantor who enters the situation when we from our side have done first all we could. Christ is a vicarious guarantor, Who from the beginning takes our place. From the very beginning of the restoration of the covenant as the covenant of grace God directs Himself with His demand no longer to us individually, but to our Head. We need to realize that such was the intent of God with the establishment of the covenant of grace.

There is then the working of God's Word coming to us from two sides. The Scripture not only convinces us on the one hand that there is no longer any expectation from us; but on the other hand it places us before the all-sufficiency of Christ, in order that we should learn from this also that there is no expectation from us. If we do not keep this two-fold working of God's Word in mind, we are forever raising the question of first and last, and are inclined to present matters in this way: We must first reach the end of our own ability and attempts before we can see Christ. Taken by itself that is true, as we sought to make clear with the above illustration. However, there is also the testimony of the gospel about the all-sufficiency of Christ whereby it makes us ashamed of our own efforts and declines and rejects them. Also by means of this we arrive at the end of our trying, and faith is stirred up in us whereby we relinquish our separation from Christ.

### ***Sustaining the Burden of God's Wrath***

The catechism separately considers the question of whether a mere creature can be found who would pay for us. The first part of the answer is that *God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed.*

There are distinctions in what God has created. We refer to a plant kingdom and an animal kingdom, and it is also possible to speak of a human kingdom and an angel kingdom. First of all we need to see the definite difference between heaven and earth. The fall in the realm of angels did not bring the earth under a curse. Conversely however, the fall of mankind had its consequences for the realm of angels, because angels owe their existence to the purpose of bringing glory to God through the fellowship between God and man, a relationship in which they are to be of service. Although we speak of a definite, clear-cut distinction, the two worlds are not isolated from each other. The relationship between these two, however, is not of that nature that the sin of man brought a curse on the world of angels. Because of the relative independence of both worlds, angels and men are not able to vouch for each other before the justice of God. A human certainly cannot do this for an angel, much less is an angel capable of doing so for man, since man is the highest of all God has created and stands above an angel.

On this earth there is a relationship between man and the lower creatures, because man was placed as head of this world by God. Of this organic relationship man is indeed the head, so that the reconciliation of man resulted in the lifting of the curse over the lower creatures, but the lower creature could never atone for man, *because it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins* (Hebr.10:4). Angels and mankind are not together in one covenant, but all other creatures on earth are involved in the covenant with man, yet in it man as head can only answer for himself.

Moreover, the catechism answers that *no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it.* With the sustaining of God's wrath is not meant merely the endurance of it. In fact, many creatures and also many people will suffer God's eternal wrath. Sustaining that wrath however means a sustaining in the sense of reconciling it. What creature is able to persevere and bear that wrath, and what creature can sustain that anger without it leading to cursing it? What human is able to suffer that wrath without totally turning against God? God's anger necessarily condemns each creature to rebel against Him, and thus that suffering has nothing atoning about it, nor anything that would work redemptively. The second part of the answer thus needs to be read as a single unit: *Furthermore, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath and deliver others from it.* No creature is able to offer himself as the atonement for others, because he cannot bear God's wrath in love.

It is incumbent upon us to see clearly what our Head needed to do in order to atone for us. Our Head had to take the place of Adam. God had given Adam a calling to choose for God's love and favor, and to hold on to it unwaveringly while that favor was his. Because of Adam's sin as well as ours in and with him, Christ had to choose for God's love and hold on to it in faith, so that there could be atonement even when He was completely forsaken by God, Who in His wrath turned against Him. And in this way, in the love of His heart through which He continued to love God's love, He needed to bear the wrath of God's love and thus reconcile our guilt. Who, being but a mere creature, would be capable of this? For surely, to retain that love for God in such circumstances is beyond the ability of any creature. And yet, to endure such wrath in that way and to sustain it in such a manner qualifies suffering as a sacrifice that atones. In such suffering all depends on the inclination of the heart.

Moreover, not only must the love for God motivate the One Who would place Himself in our stead, but also the love for those who are His own. In addition, we need to remember who they were of themselves: People who were godless, children of wrath, who from themselves could offer Him not a thing. After all, who can give love where nothing can be taken for granted deserving such love, or even that such love would be appreciated and received? Our human love presumes so much in the one to whom we give our love. We cannot give ourselves where we can expect nothing, and certainly in such an instance we are not prepared to give our life in love, and are unable to exert ourselves all the way to death. Scripture tells us that *very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man*, and that even should a man have the temerity to die for a good person, Christ did something entirely different. For Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. For *when we were God's enemies we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son* (Rom.5: 6-10). To give one's life in love for those who are nothing but enemies, and then to know that such love can presume nothing in them, is beyond the ability of any human being.

Christ must do what God has done. For when the covenant of God's favor was broken by man, and mankind became His declared enemy, God again in love turned to that man even while He could not expect anything coming from him. For everything which man in reciprocating love was required to give, would first need to be recreated by God. In turning to man again, God displayed a love that was prepared to give all and presume nothing. God confirmed that love for us in this that Christ died for us while we were yet enemies. To give such a love is beyond the power of any man.

Yet such love was essential for human deliverance. A wall had to be broken through to reach man isolated by sin. That could not occur by a love that presumed anything in him, no matter how small, nor expected something from man. We do have to give up our separation over against Christ – but that cannot happen except we are delivered by Christ through a love which all on its own gives everything. Moved by such a love did He Who would be our substitute deliver Himself to God's justice, and by such love would He afterward gain us to faith. All of this is far beyond the realm of human ability. Only in Him who is our Substitute would there be a never-ending fountain of love enabling Him to do this.

No creature could be found to take our place because no creature can love God when He has only anger for us, and because no creature has a love that is able simply to give all.

### ***The Mediator***

In the last question of this Lord's Day the term mediator appears for the first time in the catechism: *What kind of mediator and deliverer must we seek?* It is noteworthy that the catechism connects the words *mediator* and *deliverer* so closely to each other. The idea appears to be that the catechism envisions Someone whose mediation has as its purpose our deliverance. That a mediator would be necessary between God and man if no thought needed to be given to deliverance apparently lies outside the catechism's consideration.

We need to adhere to this usage of the catechism, wherein with mediator we immediately think of deliverance. It is difficult to say what is meant with mediator in general, because outside of our ecclesiastical usage the word is applied in this way only rarely. In general culture one speaks of a conciliator or a facilitator but not of a mediator. Yet, when we follow the catechism's intent, the meaning of mediator and facilitator are not so far apart. When two parties live together in peace, no mediator or conciliator is needed between them. Someone could be appointed as envoy or ambassador to the other party, but he would not have a mediating function. Only when the relationship is broken does a mediator need to attempt to restore peace between those parties.

When we retain the usage of the catechism and its intent of mediation, it is improper to speak of the Son as a creation-mediator. No mediator was necessary between God and the world as He created it, nor between God and man in the state of rectitude. It is true that God already then intended to give man His love through the Son, in Whom as the eternal Word God had expressed all things that He ever would be for mankind, and therefore all things were made by that eternal Word in that particular manner. Because of that however, the Son did not become Mediator. One could refer to the Son as an Envoy or an Ambassador in this matter. However, when one speaks of the Son as mediator at creation, the danger is encountered that opportunity is given to the dualistic idea that an antithesis or opposition should exist between God and the world as such. In agreement with the use of the catechism therefore, we speak of the Mediator as the Deliverer, that is, as the One who restores the fellowship between God and man.

The position of this Mediator nevertheless is unique. The requirement for a mediator is that he is not related to either party. Such a mediator between God and man cannot be found, because all that exists either is on God's side or opposed to Him. Moreover, it is unthinkable that God would be motivated by anyone but Himself to give Himself again in love to man. The reconciliation must be initiated unilaterally by God Himself. Therefore also Scripture does not say that Christ reconciled God and the world with each other, but that *God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ* (2 Cor.5:19). This Mediator stands fully on God's side, and is Himself God. Yet, He must also represent man, and to that end He became human. Therefore the catechism is able to say that we must seek such a Mediator: *One Who is a true and righteous man... and One Who is at the same time true God.*

From the fact that the Mediator must act as Representative of mankind, it is evident that His Mediatorship and His Headship cannot be considered as separated from each other. Only as Head of humanity can He act as Mediator. That means therefore: as Head in the covenant of grace, *i.e.*, as Head in the by God restored covenant, and as the second Adam.

This Mediatorship of Christ was determined from eternity by the Triune God in His counsel. We speak thus of a particular distinction within God's counsel. In that one counsel of God, in which all things of creation and recreation together form one plan, we distinguish among others the eternal decree of redemption or deliverance. By this we understand that decree of God wherein He from eternity determined what each of the three Persons would do for our deliverance. In that decision it was established unalterably that the Father would give the Son, that the Son would bring about reconciliation, and that the Holy Spirit would incorporate us into Christ and also would renew the world. That is the decision that has the form of a covenant between the three Persons mutually.

For this reason it is also referred to as the covenant of redemption. This covenant of redemption is something different than the covenant of grace, because the covenant of redemption is between the three Divine Persons, while the covenant of grace is between God and mankind in its Head Christ. Of course, there is a connection between the two, for the covenant of grace is founded on the covenant of redemption. When the Son placed Himself as our Deliverer in the covenant of redemption, there was connected or attached to it that He also would act as our Head in the covenant of grace.

We must not forget that it was not only behind the work of re-creation that there exists such a covenant of the three divine Persons. Also behind the work of creation there is a covenant of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity mutually, even if the Scripture mentions this less due to the nature of the case. Yet Scripture does point to this: *The LORD possessed me in the beginning of His way, before the works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was* (Prov.8:22,23 KJV).

That being *possessed* and being *set up* of the Son as the eternal Wisdom cannot mean that the Son was a creature of God. These expressions alert us that the Son in God's eternal counsel was appointed as the eternal Wisdom. What is taught in addition in that chapter is that all things have been created through the Wisdom. The same thing is said in John 1, where we read: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:1-3). Thus according to Proverbs 8, in the one counsel of God this distinction is also made that there was a decision or covenant between the three divine Persons, in which all the blessings of favor and fellowship that God intended to give man were to be in the eternal Word or Wisdom. This means therefore, that the covenant of God's favor which He established with Adam as the head of mankind was also decided in the covenant of the three Divine Persons.

However, notice the difference! According to the decision which related to the creation, the Son would as the eternal Word grant God's favor and fellowship to Adam as head of the covenant of God's favor, in order that Adam through a voluntary choice, would remain in that fellowship. In keeping with the covenant that entailed deliverance, the Son as the incarnate Word would Himself act as Head of the new humanity in the covenant of grace. In the decision about the creation there was fellowship between the eternal Word and our head, while in the decree of our deliverance the eternal Word and our Head are the same. There we stand before the miracle of God's grace, in which the Son Himself, becoming flesh, was willing to act as our Head. That is the miracle the catechism confesses, stating that our Mediator must be *One who is a true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures; that is, One who is at the same time true God.*

This is not yet the place to discuss the question of how we are to see the unity between the divine and human natures of Christ. That will only take place in Lord's Day 14. We must however see reflected in the present answer of the catechism the unity or oneness of the Mediator. Herein is confessed the miracle that the Son of God Himself as the second Adam entered into the covenant of grace as our Head. Since the Son of God Himself has become our Head, as far as we are concerned the fellowship between God and us is now forever sure. In the covenant of God's favor it depended on Adam's choice, but in the covenant of grace all was determined by the decision of the second Adam, Who because He is also God's Son, can never choose against God.

The appearance of the eternal Word as our Head presumed however that He would atone for us and reconcile us with God. He could never have bound Himself to us eternally in this manner, if in that relationship was not guaranteed His atoning suffering as well. Thus as our Head He could also be our Mediator Who obtained for us peace with God.

This Mediator satisfied all the conditions discussed above. He was man, and He loved God with a human heart. Also, He loved His own with His human heart. In connection with the sequence in this last answer of the catechism, wherein is stated first that He must be truly human and truly righteous, we address first the Mediator's love as man. He was required to atone as man. For this He needed to offer Himself in a love that bound Himself simultaneously to God and to His own.

We must not overlook the Mediator's human love, and thus we focus on it first. For if we do not see that we could not envision Him as our Head, as the second Adam, and therefore not as our Mediator. It was His human love that was tested in Gethsemane, and in which He tenaciously held on both to God and to His own. After all, it is impossible for God's love to come into temptation. Thus we see the love of the Mediator's human heart stirred to its zenith when in the chapter of the foot washing, we read that *having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end* (John 13:1 NKJ). That love enabled Him at the beginning of His final suffering to humble Himself at the feet of His disciples and thus among them assume the lowest place, and to be the least – the One on Whom they all could fall back with their sins. In this humiliation He performed the task of a Mediator that was expected of Him.

Already then however God increasingly begins to turn against Him and to direct His wrath toward Him. How will the Mediator now continue to love God and His own, and with that human love hold on to God and to His own? If there had been only human love functioning in Him, He would have succumbed in the final complete abandonment. Yet in this He was sustained by His divine love since He was also God. And by that divine love His human love was enabled and motivated to its highest degree, and in obedience He humbly said, *Yet not My will, but Yours be done* (Luke 22:42). In that compliant submission His suffering became an atoning sacrifice, and He offered it as reconciliation to God.

We did speak first of His human love, but our redemption emanated from Him as God. Behind that human love and in it we must see, even from the very beginning, His divine love. Thus everything about Him is human to the very core, but at the same time it is thoroughly divine. We confess of course the oneness of the Mediator, but that oneness or unity does not dissolve the distinction of the human and the divine in Him. The church has confessed that difference of His human and divine quality or nature in Him, but refused to accept that He with one divine-human compulsion of the will finished His work of deliverance. Over against this, the church expressed that in the Mediator there were recognizable two kinds of wills, the human as well as the divine. By faith in Him we learn to know His two-fold will and His two-fold love. Therefore, the words of the catechism that He must be *a true and righteous man*, while *at the same time true God*, are not merely doctrinal articulations, but contain a truth without which the living faith whereby we are bound to Him cannot exist.

**THE TRUE FAITH**  
**S. G. De Graaf**  
 Translation by Richard Stienstra

## Lord's Day 6

### 16. *Why must He be a true and righteous man?*

*He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin.*

*He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others.*

### 17. *Why must He at the same time be true God?*

*He must be true God so that by the power of His divine nature He might bear in His human nature the burden of God's wrath, and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life.*

### 18. *But who is that Mediator who at the same time is true God and a true and righteous man?*

*Our Lord Jesus Christ, Whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).*

### 19. *From where do you know this?*

*From the holy gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise. Later, He had it proclaimed by the patriarchs and prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law. Finally, He had it fulfilled it through His own Son.*

### **No Redundant Repetition**

One could easily accuse the catechism here of being verbose. The previous answers had already arrived at the thought that we must look for such a Mediator, namely *One who is a true and righteous man, and at the same time true God*. Why should there now yet be a repetition in questions 16 and 17? Could not question 18 immediately have been connected to question 15?

It is undeniable that in both of these Lord's Days the requirements for the Mediator are discussed quite extensively. This is related to the meaning of substitutionary atonement that occupies such a central place in the gospel of redemption. Thus, this treatment in the catechism evidently provides a certain counterweight to the tendency to push Christ's vicarious atonement in His work of redemption into the background, or even to deny it entirely. In light of that, the catechism receives a fresh meaning again in our time. In commenting on the previous Lord's Day we already noted that there exists a distinct tendency to confess all other facets of that redemption, but not that Christ Who as our Head satisfied God's justice in our place. We connected that with losing sight of the covenant, since only in the covenant can Christ be seen as our Head and able to act in our place.

Yet the question arises whether at the beginning of our Lord's Day both requirements for the Mediator are not considered somewhat differently than they were in the second half of the previous one. That is indeed the case. The reasoning in the previous Lord's Day had concluded with the thought that the Mediator must at the same time be a true and righteous man and true God. Thus, what we now have in our mind's eye is that Mediator, Who is both God and man. Therefore, the question is no longer: Why must our Mediator be man? Rather, the question is: Why must He Who is true God also be

man? Furthermore, it is no longer asked: Why must our Mediator be God? Rather, at issue is: Why must He Who is man, also be God? Thus, every time now when one goes from the one nature of the Mediator to the other, one sees especially the connection or relationship of the one to the other.

Thus in the first question of this Lord's Day, we face in fact the age-old question: "Why must God be man?" Therefore, the difference between this Lord's Day and the preceding one can also properly be phrased: In Lord's Day 5 the starting point was in the substitutionary atonement, while in the present one it is in the incarnation of God. Thus, both Lord's Days must be treated in conjunction with each other.

When in this context we deal with the incarnation of the Word, we are immediately struck by the aspect of shame involved. Presently we will also see the glory of the incarnation, but first we need to be deeply ashamed that this was necessitated by our sins. Even when we consider the glorified Christ, that is, God's Son Who now and everlastingly is glorified as man, it must put us to shame that we necessitated God's redeeming act of love by our sins. We may presume that in the incarnation of the Word a glorious relationship between God and man resulted of which we cannot fathom the breadth and length, the height and depth. Nevertheless, that does not prevent us from constantly being ashamed of our debt through which we made this necessary. Sometimes we may think: "That fortunate guilt of Adam!" Yet that guilt confuses and frightens us as well. And especially when we consider the humiliation of Christ's nature on earth, that condescending act of God's love brings us utmost shame.

Almost automatically we tend to think of a particular context. After the fall God has revealed the nature of our deed by saying, *the man has now become like one of Us* (Gen.3:22). Our act of godless pride was answered by God in a deed of condescending love, as He became like one of us. Is any deed possible that is filled with more love and yet is more radical to cut off the way of our pride? God could break that pride with His eternal judgment, but for the sake of our faith He cuts off that pride at its very root by the act of the incarnation of the Word, and with it He always counters human self-exaltation. Whenever we seek to raise ourselves up to God and think that for this we must be like God, or must make ourselves like God, He meets us with the claim that we will find Him in the revelation of His human humiliation. Thus every attempt to find something divine in man and by it to raise man to God is starkly contrasted by the gospel of the incarnation of the Word. The flesh is crucified in all of us when we go to the crib of Bethlehem in order by faith to find God there. That God has stooped down and lived with us as one of us must put to death our every inclination toward pride.

However, we are not speaking here of the incarnation of the Word in isolation. That in fact would be impossible since the incarnation is related to our fall into sin. We do not confess that even if we had not sinned the Son of God would have become man. The incarnation of the Word in Scripture always is tied to the fall into sin, and it is not possible for us to consider the incarnation apart from it. In this Lord's Day it is viewed in the special context of and relationship to substitutionary atonement.

As answer to the question of why God must become man, the catechism states that *He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin*. It would be incorrect to put the emphasis on the fact that the catechism here speaks of the human "nature," and then to explain: "The catechism refers to the human nature, to alert us already here to the thought that the Son of God did not take on a human person." However, that the Son of God did not take on a human person is according to our confession a certainty, and is considered later. But it is wrong to believe that for that reason the focus of attention here is on the human nature.

In connection with what was said in the previous Lord's Day about *another creature*, one must think here of the human nature as its own kind by which it distinguishes itself from the other creatures who have a nature of their own. The human nature is unique, has its own characteristics, must obey special laws, and has a responsibility not shared with other creatures. To summarize it all: man is created in God's image. Since man's nature has such special qualities and abilities and is the highest of God's creatures, no other creature is able to appear in his place and therefore it must now appear on its own behalf in God's judgment. What is at issue in this context is the peculiar quality of the human nature, because of which it is irreplaceable in God's judgment.

Apparently pagans understood something of that irreplaceable quality of man's nature, in that they were not satisfied with offering animals but presented a human sacrifice. However, that was the sacrifice humans themselves had chosen, and

such was not the sacrifice of Him Whom God had given as Head, and thus as atonement for the world. In all those human sacrifices the sin of man's obstinacy was present since they had rejected the grace of God and had not learned to hope for a sacrifice of reconciliation and atonement that God would provide for us.

Furthermore, contained in the expression *the human nature* is the universality of and the commonality in sin. It is not just that individuals are corrupt, but the nature that we all have in common has been degenerated by sin. Not only are we accountable for our personal sins, but also for the sins of our nature that we share. The guilt of the sins of the human nature is our responsibility; and in addition, not merely those sinful deeds which can be counted, but especially sin – in the singular – which lives within us. We bear the burden of guilt for the disruption of the entire human existence. In God's judgment that *human nature* must appear on its own behalf by a man Who could truly represent that nature because He could take our place not only as an individual human, but also as our Head.

Should such a man indeed act for humanity, He must be a righteous man, since a man *who is himself a sinner cannot pay for others*. The reason for this is not merely that a sinful man is not worthy to put himself in the place of others, but a sinful man is himself headed in the wrong direction, and is not turned in love toward God nor his neighbor. For that reason he is not able to bear the burden of God's wrath in love, by which love the suffering becomes a sacrifice of atonement and reconciliation.

The catechism has thus provided an answer to the question of why God has become man. It is not an abstract statement, because in our confession our reasoning proceeds from its fulfillment. After all, this incarnation of God is a reality and has happened for us. And now we have to accept this actuality, no longer keeping ourselves at a distance from Him Who was God in the flesh. In our minds He occupies the center of world history as the One Who has come to replace us in God's judgment. Still, it is difficult and for us by nature impossible to acknowledge Christ as such. Deep within us lives the sense that the human nature that sinned must pay for that sin. The sacrifice must be made by man, brought to God, and presented to Him. In the reconciliation we acknowledge a connection from below to above, from earth to heaven. We ourselves as humanity must provide for the atonement. Such is the reason why all the efforts exist to be right with God!

Thus when God in His own miraculous way provides for the man Who is able to do it, we keep ourselves at a distance from that Mediator. After all, there is another connection to be discerned in the functioning of that Mediator. He is given to us by God. The line from below to heaven in the reconciliation presupposes the one from above to below, from heaven to earth. Therefore all the credit that we would give to ourselves is taken away, which is precisely what makes man by nature continue to resist that Mediator.

However, could anything be more glorious than that God Himself has come, and became man in order to take our place in His judgment as one of us? We spoke earlier of the shame in the incarnation of the Word. There is also another side. That God deigned to become one of us is something that must fill us with endless amazement, and evoke in us ceaseless adoration. Only in this way do we believe and acknowledge Christ as our Mediator. As long as there is not astonished worship in us we keep ourselves far from the Mediator, and remain in our desire to accomplish atonement and reconciliation without God's help. It is in adoration and worship that we change. After all, there is always faith in adoration, and without adoration faith is impossible. In the devotion of faith we see the glory of the incarnation of the Word. By pointing to this however, we already have made the transition to the discussion of the second question of why the Mediator Who is man must also be God.

### ***His Human and Divine Love in Atoning God's Wrath***

There is a constraint to all human love. Also when we have been restored in that love to God by His Spirit, there is still a paucity in that love and a great deficiency. We are not able to give to God the love that is due to Him. Already in that sense our love is not adequate. In the same way there is also a deficiency in our love for people. Even in the most intimate and ideal relationship there is a great shortcoming. In fact, even in that love there is a limitation of which we should be ashamed. We cannot even fulfill the positive requirement that we should respond to God's love in love to Him and to each other, let alone that we by the power of our love could bear God's wrath in order to satisfy it!

But even if our love were perfect as it was in the beginning, we would not be able to endure God's wrath in that love with the intent of propitiating it. Mere human love would always be consumed in that fire. Divine help alone would be of no avail. Mere human love no matter how it would be supported was too finite and limited to be able to bear that infinite divine wrath. There simply would be no comparison between the awesome burden and that which must bear it. After all, the finite cannot bear the infinite, for the eternal is measured only with the eternal.

We can already say concerning man's love at the very beginning, that this love by which he answered and responded to God's love, did not exist nor fulfill its obligation without the active involvement of the Spirit of God. Left to himself man can never satisfy that demand. In bearing God's wrath and in reconciliation, such a presence of God's Spirit was not enough however. Not only an influencing, supporting, and sustaining power was needed, but a human love was required that was at the same time a divine love. This alone could stand in the judgment and satisfy God's infinite wrath. Thus we stand before the wondrous unity of the divine and the human in the Mediator's love. And that human must at the same time also be the divine.

We stand here before a miracle that surpasses all human reasoning. This unity of God and man in the Mediator is incomparable with anything else because it is unique. It cannot be compared with the covenantal fellowship between God and man, even when from man's side this relationship would be holy and perfect. For in that covenantal relationship there is reciprocity, a give and take, which excludes a oneness or unity, since the covenant is an interaction between two parties. In the Mediator there is a perfect and complete unity between the divine and the human – a unity which nevertheless does not abolish the differences between those two. The divine in the Mediator did not become human, and the human did not become divine. The divine and the human were like two sides of the one Mediator. Thus there was in Him a love that was human and yet at the same time divine.

We must not attempt to ask how to resolve and understand that unity in our minds, for it far surpasses our intellect. If already the relationship of God to all creation, and especially the relation between His all-determining will and the responsibility of man surpasses our understanding, how much more then the unity between God and man in the Mediator! We approach this unity here only from the point of view of its necessity for the atonement.

The catechism speaks about that unity in these words: *so that by the power of His divine nature He might bear in His human nature the burden of God's wrath, and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life.* We note that **by the power of His divine nature** is something other than **sustained by the power of His divine nature.** The first intends to say: because of the fact that He is also God. For no one except that He is also God, would ever be able to enter into that judgment. Yet on the other hand it states that He has borne the weight of God's wrath in His humanity. God has not suffered, but He has suffered as man who was also God.

We noted above that the unity of the divine and the human in the Mediator is not to be compared with the covenant relationship between God and man. However it is true that in the covenant of grace that relationship and fellowship is grounded in the fact that Christ is both God and man, and thus satisfied the justice of God. That covenantal relationship is anchored unalterably and securely in the wondrous work of Him Who is God and man. With this we are granted a blessedness and a certainty far surpassing that in the covenant of God's favor. For central then was the obedience which Adam would show in fellowship with the eternal Word, the obedience of his choice made by faith. At present the obedience of Him Who is the incarnate Word is central, and He reconciled us through His obedience.

With this covenant fellowship which is the fruit of that reconciliation, we shall need to be satisfied. Not ever ought we to strive for a sort of union between the divine and the human within ourselves. That could happen as some speculate that since we must be conformed to Christ to some degree, we might receive a few sparks of the fire of divinity in Him, a few drops out of that ocean. With this is connected the view that the Son of God would have become man, yet without sin in order that He would share with us some of His divinity.

Some have come to the same conclusion by speculating that whether in the church or state, the office and the divine authority of that office would make the office bearer worthy of worship. Thus the high priest in the Old Testament held divine authority which came to expression in his robe. However, they did not kneel before him. Nevertheless, for a man to be adorned with the divine authority of his office is something other than the union of the human and the divine in the Mediator.

It is true that God could with the former point as a shadow to the latter, as also Christ could point from His Sonship to the name “gods” of those who held the prophetic office. He said: *If He called them 'gods,' to whom the Word of God came-- and the Scripture cannot be broken-- what about the One whom the Father set apart as His very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse Me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'?* (John 10:35-36). Outside of the Christian church there is a constant concept floating about of a certain unity between the divine and the human in man. However, when we faithfully confess that the Mediator by the power of that wondrous oneness of His being God and being man brought about reconciliation, and when we live by that faith, we avoid every attempt to pursue such a unity for ourselves. When a person still has a need of something different, it is a result of the fact that he does not live faithfully out of the reconciliation of the Mediator.

### ***Obtaining and Restoring Righteousness and Life***

Responding to the question of why the Mediator at the same time must be true God, the twofold answer is given in the words *and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life*. Thus we need to distinguish here between obtaining and restoring.

When the discussion focuses on the obtaining or earning of righteousness and life, it is the other side of what we discussed above concerning the satisfying of God’s wrath. Satisfying the wrath is the negative side, and obtaining the righteousness and life is the positive side of that one work of the Mediator. Not only has the aversion of God with respect to us been overcome, but also we once more live in God’s favor and we again possess a righteousness and life before His face. Through the work of Christ it is as if we never have had sin, or never even had sinned; indeed it is as if we had earned all the righteousness which Christ has accomplished for us. It is as if we not only had not done anything wrong, but also as if we had never neglected anything, but instead had always given the response of love to the Lord. For the righteousness consists in this that we give to God what is His, that is, the response of love to which He has a right; and when we give this responding love, we truly live. Christ has earned all that through His obedience. Now we speak only of what we are in Christ before God concerning the crediting to us of what is in Christ, since God considers us in Him. All of that is found in *obtaining*. We do not yet speak about the restoration of the obedient life in us, for that comes in *restoring*.

When we now speak about the Mediator obtaining righteousness and life for us, we need to give a somewhat different answer to the question of why the Mediator must be true God, than the one we previously provided. That He was true God determined also the value of His sacrifice. Again we must therefore not only think of His humanity being sustained by His divinity, but of the unity of the human and the divine in Him. On Golgotha the blood was shed of Him Who was at the same time man and God. Therein a love is given which is both human and divine at the same time. In this way His suffering for the entire human race and for the whole world could be sufficient to bring them back to God. Therefore the Scripture speaks of the valuable, that is, of *the precious blood of Christ* (1 Pet.1:19). Divine love has been the deepest *motif* or theme in that voluntary obedient suffering and establishes its inestimable worth. In that suffering God gave Himself in His love. That remains the indescribable quality in the suffering of Christ, and constitutes its infinite worth. Therefore, this deed is a guarantee for a whole world.

When we take note of this, we see very clearly in the atonement the direction or path from above to below. The atonement took place through a sacrifice by a man of the earth offered to God. That sacrifice however only became possible because the *motif* of divine love acted in it. The line from below to above was controlled by, and first made possible by the line from above to below, in that God Himself became man. Thus in Christ His being-sent and His being-God come together. In His office as Mediator He is sent and endowed with divine authority, while He Himself at the same time is God. Because these two realities come together in Him, it was possible for Him from the official authority of the prophets to refer to His being God’s Son: *If He called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came-- and the Scripture cannot be broken--what about the One whom the Father set apart as His very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse Me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'?* (John 10:35,36). We must however respect this uniqueness in the Mediator, and there may not be in us any trace of the thought that a semblance of this might be found in any man. Faith in the uniqueness of the Mediator and worshipping that Mediator will keep us from such a thought.

Besides the fact that Christ had to earn for us righteousness and life, He also needed to restore these to us. Therein also is found an answer to the question of why the Mediator who is man must also be God. He has to restore to us what we lost, because He gives us faith in Him, and righteousness and life come to us through faith. By faith we not only receive the righteousness which Christ has obtained for us, but through this we learn again righteousness and the giving of ourselves to God and to each other according to His command. In addition, by faith we also have true life in God's fellowship. And why are we able to believe in Christ except that we see Him as God? Our faith can never be in any creature.

Moreover, the quickening of faith in us must come from Him as God. He works this in us by His Spirit, but it takes place mediately, for He uses His Word and illuminates our entire life by it. Therein He shows us and confers a love upon us that must overcome and control us.

Also in this we need to distinguish the two sides of the Mediator, the divine and the human. On the one hand we are surprised and delighted that God's love has come so close to us in that His Son became man. And when we further consider that He became our Head, and took upon Himself our cause in God's judgment, we begin to realize that He is closer to us than any other person, even one with whom we may live in the closest of relationships. For to Him who has thus sought us we can open our whole heart. And when we are prepared to know Him in this way, we are amazed on the other hand that this love which is so close to us, is at the same time so lofty and so inscrutable since it is simultaneously a divine love. In such a Mediator Who is so close to us we are prepared to confide because His love is so divinely great and so strong and never puts us to shame. Because He reveals this to us in His Word and in guiding our life even as that is directed by His Word, He works faith in us. Thus also in this work of the Mediator we see a reason why He in addition to being man also needed to be God.

### ***The Gift of Love for Complete Redemption***

Already earlier we discussed that with the Mediator the fact that He is sent by God and that thus His office of being Son of God (John 10:35,36) coincides with His eternal Sonship. He is the sent One from God and is at the same time God Himself. The love in the Mediator is given us from God, and it is at the same time a divine love. We need to think of this when we read in the third answer that the Mediator is given us from God. This answer is essentially taken from 1 Corinthians 1:30, where it actually states that Christ Jesus *has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption*. We note that the words *He has become for us wisdom from God* express even to a greater extent that in Him the divine love came to us directly.

The Mediator is given to us from God and is Himself God. That comes somewhat closer to us when we think of the eternal counsel of redemption, about which we spoke in the last Lord's Day. In that counsel was determined what the three Persons in the divine Being would do for our redemption. In that activity there is nothing accidental, but everything is determined in the eternal decision of the Triune God. By virtue of that counsel of redemption or covenant of redemption the Mediator is given to us by the Triune God; but He Himself is also God. Does the eternal counsel of the Triune God not always stand behind every deed of one of the three Persons?

Thus with Scripture we discern the starting point of our redemption in the eternal counsel of God. That is the starting point of which Paul thought when in Romans 11:34 he quoted the words of Isaiah 40:13, 14: *Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?* Paul did alter the meaning of those words somewhat when he quoted them. Isaiah referred to God's counsel concerning creation, but Paul to God's counsel of redemption. Paul intends to say that no one could know beforehand the thoughts and will of God. For those thoughts and the will of God for our redemption are impossible to explain through anything outside of Himself, since they have been according to His sovereign good pleasure within Him from eternity, and in this no one has been His counselor. Behind this beginning no one is able to go, for this intention was completely sovereign, and there is no involvement of any creature: *Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen* (Rom.11:35, 36).

We cannot say that a person's simple faith has nothing to do with that. Believing after all is seeing that the initiative for our redemption does not lie with us but with God. Believing is seeing that we have not given something, for which in

return we should be rewarded or compensated. Believing is to live by sovereign grace. For that faith and to that faith the Mediator is given. Because God has revealed to us the Mediator and given Him to us, God creates faith in us; and through that faith we receive the Mediator. To believe is to receive a Mediator from God, who is Himself God. Then we have given the initiative for our redemption entirely out of our own hands, and we receive thereby a treasure which because it is divine, is unfathomable.

Thus it has already been noted that the Mediator is given to us in faith, which trusts God's love in Him. Without faith we cannot say that the Mediator has been given to us. We hold on to Him when He has been given to us through the love in our hearts; but there is no love without confidence, and love always starts with trust and confidence.

For us it is therefore not about receiving certain things. We wish to have the Mediator Himself, and in Him God, since the love of God is given to us in Him. And we have the Mediator in faith and in love and also in the hope which we have in Him. In that faith, in that love, and in that hope it is always about the Mediator personally to whom our heart reaches out. Never may anything, whatever the blessing, be placed ahead of the Mediator, not even atonement. We do not desire atonement for atonement's sake, but we desire God being reconciled with us. Our attention and focus is never diverted from God, not even by the Mediator and the atonement He accomplished, since He Himself actually and truly is God. It is that divine love which reconciled us with itself and in that manner restored such love to us.

In this way all things are given to us in the Mediator. He is given to us from God for wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and for complete redemption. These benefits are thus not added to the Mediator, so that we only receive them from His hands, but they are given to us in Him and with Him. That is possible of course because the Mediator is in fact the divine love which reconciles us. And for us everything is in that reconciling love.

At this point we reach back for a moment to what was said in connection with the third Lord's Day about the image of God. The knowledge of God, the righteousness, and the holiness was not originally something we possessed as though it was given along with our nature. These characteristics of God's image shone in us through the bond of faith with the eternal Word – the love of God given to us in that Word. When in this Lord's Day now being considered we speak of wisdom, righteousness, and holiness, there is an apparent connection with the three features of the image of God. When that image is evident in us by faith, then it is also being restored in us by that faith. Once upon a time, however, there was by faith the fellowship in the love of God which was given us in the eternal Word. Now there is the fellowship of faith with the atoning love of God which comes to us in the incarnate Word.

The Mediator is given us from God for wisdom. This wisdom consists in having God's love in Christ. Such wisdom is something different than a process of maturation. Through this wisdom we are able to understand the meaning and purpose of life; for that meaning and purpose lie in God's love – from which, through which, and to which all things are made. This wisdom does not exclude the investigation and study of life and of the world with all their happenings, but rather includes them. When we through faith and in responding love share in God's love, in which lies the origin of the world and life, we are always busy discovering life. However, then we observe the world from a particular, that is from the correct perspective, namely from that of the love of God, we develop true insight and life becomes a journey of discovery.

Thus for us this wisdom is in the fellowship with Christ – the fullness of God's love, Who is also called Wisdom. God's love has created the world in wisdom, for the wisdom is in the love. Christ as the love of God is the purpose of all things and has also determined and given the meaning to all things. When we speak in all honesty about the meaning and purpose of things, we talk about Christ; and we must do so consciously. Thus our speaking with wisdom is always a speaking about Christ. The Son as Love and Wisdom is not only the Creator of all things, but He is also their Deliverer. Therefore as the love in Christ has come to us, with it the redeeming word was also spoken. That healing word in a particular need of the world or of life can never be deduced from the facts alone. Without the connection with the love of God in Christ we will never have the proper view of the facts. We must always seek that fellowship with Christ if we wish to speak even one word that functions in a liberating manner.

Since we understand the pathway through life to be in fellowship with Christ, we also know the way out of it. The last is dependent on the first. We cannot learn to die, if we did not learn to live. Frequently we are not prepared for death

because we are not adjusted to life. We have the wisdom to die if we have the wisdom to live. Thus the Mediator has been given us for wisdom in all circumstances.

Moreover, He is given to us by God for righteousness. In fact the wisdom already presupposed reconciliation and fellowship with the love of God. However it is that love itself which reconciles us, and not only in the life of the Mediator has it given the means of reconciliation, but the atonement also came from that love and was cultivated by it. By faith we have fellowship with that love, which reconciles us.

In any case in connection with the righteousness which is given us in the Mediator, we must not only think of the restored relationship with God, that is, of our justification viewed as the forgiveness of our sins and as receiving the right to eternal life. For Christ is given us for righteousness also in that sense that we in the fellowship of God's love learn again to deal righteously in responding love to God and our neighbor, being able to give what we owe them. That means that we give ourselves to God and to our neighbor. Only then do we act righteously. In this sense also we must understand the righteousness which belonged to the image of God.

From the preceding it is evident that there can never be just or righteous dealings if we are not reconciled with God and thus have been justified. Only when through atonement we are restored to God's love can there be talk of righteous acts in responding love. As long as we in bitterness maintain our isolation, we may well insist on our own right and believe that while we do have to deal with strict justice, nevertheless all our actions are unrighteous, because we refuse to give ourselves in love. But God, and all He has created in His good pleasure has a right to our love.

Furthermore, the Mediator is given us for holiness or sanctification. What is sanctification but the glow of love? In God's holiness may be seen especially the fact that He upholds and maintains Himself. Therefore His holiness can be so terrible. Yet it is the self-maintenance of God in His love. That is why the holiness of God is so full of delight and fascination for the one who comprehends this love of God and relates to it. If God's holiness were not the holiness of His love, it could only terrify us. Thus now it can be understood also that in our holiness we maintain ourselves, but not in that horrible sense in which we maintain ourselves over against God. There may be and there must be a maintaining of ourselves in God's love – in the love which God has given us for Him, and for all that is His and thus also for ourselves. In that love for ourselves, for God's sake, we may and must sustain ourselves. In that love we must always remain truly ourselves and may not allow that something outside of us or in us should violate that love for God and for all that is His. Thus if our holiness is the holiness of love – otherwise it cannot exist – then there is nothing in that holiness that is offensive, but rather it is infinitely beautiful and desirable. In this way there was holiness in Jesus. Thus our holiness is seen also in the responding love that we have by faith in God's love in the Mediator. Thus the Mediator is given us for holiness.

All that is given us in the Mediator is summarized in the fact that He is given us for complete redemption. This redemption comes in wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification. It does not appear alongside of it, and not in addition to it, but it is given in or with it. It is the restoration of the image of God in us through faith joining with the love of God in Christ. In this life, however, it is present only in principle, and waits for its completion in the future of Christ. Then the love of God in Christ will have conquered us fully, and there will be nothing anymore that interferes with the answer of our responding love. For then it will direct life in its full and complete responding love so that our glory, which is the dominion over all things, will be restored.

### ***Knowledge Concerning the Mediator***

The catechism finally dares to ask the question: *From where do you know this?* It is often the practice to poke a little fun at people who "know it." A person appears more intelligent when claiming not to know anything with certainty – even when he would be able to address the questions asked – yet in each instance at least as it relates to the most significant questions, he dares not express an opinion. The question of who God is for us, and how He gives Himself to us in the Mediator, and what He asks of us in the Mediator, needs to remain in discussion continually. But then we are not able to know anything with certainty in the kingdom of God.

Later we need to consider our knowledge of God. Here, however, it is necessary to mention that the catechism speaks of a knowing, and of an accurate and exact knowing. After all, the answer notes that in various ways God has revealed the Mediator to us. God has labored over the course of the centuries in order that we should know the Mediator, and that we would know with certainty all things concerning Him. It is true that there is a limitation of receptivity in us, and as a result a considerable measure of uncertainty remains with respect to the Mediator. However, imagine if we merely were to see this as sin, and not consider that as normal! Nevertheless even this flaw in receptiveness is increasingly overcome by a faithful embracing of God's love in the Mediator. The Mediator creates in us His own possibilities to know Him. Through a believing acceptance of God's love, the image of God is increasingly restored in us. Then agreement and conformity is established between Him Whom we must learn to know, and us who need to know Him. And thus we discern Him. In this way we dare to speak about Him with certainty.

The revelation of the Mediator is given to us in *the holy gospel*. Besides the gospel we distinguish in the Word of God yet the law. The gospel is the norm for our believing, while the law tells us how we must love God and our neighbor. Although there is no true believing without loving, that still does not take away the fact that we distinguish between these two. Contained in the law as the law of love there is undoubtedly also something of the revelation of the Mediator, since our love could never be other than responding love, that is, an answer to the love of God which is given us in the Mediator. In the gospel however we are told explicitly who God will be for us in the Mediator and how therefore we should receive Him in faith.

We know who the Mediator is *from the holy gospel*. There is no other source of knowledge from which we could learn the love of God in the Mediator in addition to the gospel. That gospel illuminates the entire world history as well as the history of our own life and experience so that we also meet Christ in life. Outside of the gospel however, life would be a riddle for us. God did not let us as it were search and grope blindly for the Mediator. We would never have found Him, because the idea of redeeming in this way would never have occurred to us. After all, no one has known the mind of the LORD nor has anyone been His counselor. If this redemption is so completely from God alone, our knowledge of this redemption must also exclusively come from God.

Related to this is the fact that we know the Mediator by faith alone – the faith that submits itself to God's revelation in the gospel and accepts it. When we read here that we know through the gospel, it does not mean that we merely take note of the revelation of God concerning the Mediator, as we might with so many other matters. In God's love in the Mediator we have to do with the beginning and with the principle of redemption. We receive knowledge of this only by way of bowing down in faith before the will and Word of God concerning redemption. And when by faith that light has gone on for us, we also accept all other matters in the proper way.

When we say that we must bow before the gospel, it means that the gospel is not merely given as the content for our faith but also as its norm. It should not really raise any objection in us when already now the gospel is spoken of as a norm. For the gospel is indeed an offer, the promise of a gift; yet it is not an offer that leaves us without obligation or free with respect to it. We have to believe it, and we have to believe in the way it presents itself. In doing so one does not need to be afraid that by this view of the gospel our soul would be restricted or fossilized. Faith does not somehow exist all by itself within us, but is most intimately tied to all other functions.

Thus there is no faith without also the love for God and the neighbor being affected in us, or without our eyes being opened for the beauty of the Mediator, or without the right of God and our neighbor being recognized, and so forth. Our whole inner life is turned around by faith in the gospel. One does not need to fear that when we bow before the gospel as the norm of our faith it produces only an external obedience. Everything within us opposes this, and in the course of our life this is worked out ever more fully. Thus the depth of our inner life is greatly affected and we receive an ever richer life. This life in its struggle with the gospel in order to bow before it is truly fruitful. However, a life in which one does not go out from the gospel as the norm for one's inner life of the soul, but insists on one's own independent inner life, and seeks to cultivate this as much as possible, will remain truly unfruitful even with an appearance of mystical depth.

The so-called evangelicals frequently forget that the gospel is not only an offer and a promise, but also the norm for our believing. Among these free-evangelicals a person is given the freedom to accept the offer or not, which actually does not exist, for within the gospel itself is the obligation to believe it, and to believe it in the way in which it presents itself. When one does not see the gospel as the norm for our believing, one will in due time also lose sight of the content of the

gospel, for the content of the gospel is God's love in the Mediator – a love which leaves no freedom in our believing. That love in the Mediator has not only been the means for atonement, but it also went out from God alone, and therefore it determines our entire believing. As norm for our believing, the gospel is brought to expression in the doctrine of the church. The right of the church to formulate a confession completely falls away when we would view the gospel no longer as the norm of our believing.

With that content and therefore as norm for our believing the gospel must show us that when we proceed from the revelation of Scripture – namely that God has revealed His entire love which He wanted to give us in the eternal Word – then the eternal Word is both the content and the One Who proclaims that gospel. God's Word in the eternal Word is the content of our believing, and the proclaimed or revealed Word is its norm.

Thus the gospel has dominated the history of the world and will control it to the end. It does not merely wish to control it, but actually does control it. The gospel does this as the norm for our believing. It does not exist outside of the world as something that can be accepted or not accepted, but it controls the entire history as the norm for faith; whether believed or rejected, it determines the blessing or curse of humanity. Faith after all is the highest and also the leading function in man; in his position with respect to faith his entire life is determined. Thus the gospel was and is also a work of God. His Word is also His deed, whether it is for blessing or whether for curse, for there is in the gospel also a curse for those who reject it.

Related to this is the fact that the gospel itself also experiences a history. It does not merely exist of a few ideas which have for all time the same intent, extent, and application, having an identical outworking in every era; but it experiences a process of development. This development is pointed to in this answer of the catechism. In that development it has taken various elements out of world history in its service, precisely because it entered into that history. The thought world of people is also in part integrated into the gospel, but it marks or imprints those assimilated ideas in its own way and thus intends to bring about a profound change in that world of ideas. The "evangelicals" tend to see the gospel consisting of a few ideas that always remain the same, and for them a historical development of the gospel itself by which it controls the history of the world is unacceptable.

The starting point of the gospel is in the mother promise, which is the mother of all later promises. This promise is thus the principle from which God emanated all further promises. Nothing has ever been added to this first promise externally, since in essence the entire gospel is given in the mother promise. Adam was saved by the same faith in the same gospel that we are. The development of the gospel was organic. Thus the unity of the gospel is maintained in all the differences and the development over the course of the ages. In this way, the unity between those who have a richly developed faith and those whose faith is still in its infancy is maintained.

The great incision in the history of the gospel lies in the coming of Christ and everything immediately connected with this, and thus also the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ. Through His only begotten Son God has fulfilled the gospel, as the catechism states here. In this, the gospel is viewed especially as a promise. Of course, before that time there was also a redemptive work of God in the gospel when people were being brought to faith by it. However through the coming of Christ, that which is the center of the gospel, has become a reality.

Thus there is a turning point in the history of the gospel. Before that time people lived by faith in the coming of the Christ. At that time the world was under the curse of sin; the coming of redemption was yet in the future. It was especially the time of being strangers and sojourners on earth. With the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit that curse is conquered in principle. Through Christ the guilt of sin is atoned for, and through the outpouring of the Spirit God intended to sanctify the whole world again, in that He gave Him to His people to use by faith. By believing His Word His people would possess the entire world. The reason His people still remained strangers on earth did not lie in the fact that God withheld the use or the possession of that earth from them, but is the result of the fact that the power of sin in this world has not been overcome, nor has the power of sinners.

The patriarchs also still groaned under the consciousness of the curse which had come over the earth because of sin. For them there was redemption in the gospel, because by faith in that gospel the bond with God became restored. Nevertheless, the cursed and not yet dominated earth called out their guilt to them. In the ceremonial law the promise of the gospel was clearly placed before their eyes on the one hand, and thus the gospel in those ceremonies worked

redemptively. Yet on the other hand, in many stipulations of the ceremonial law, in the washings and abstinences, in the distance between God in the holy of holies and the people, the curse was demonstrated. The gospel was in that time especially a promise and waited yet its fulfillment. Thus with the advent of Christ, the dominion of the entire earth in the Name of God Who in His atoning love appeared in the Mediator, could finally come.

Also between the time of the patriarchs and the time of the prophets, which began with Moses, a difference still exists. God revealed Himself to Abraham as *God Almighty*, and to Moses as *Yahweh*: I Am Who I Am, the One faithful to His covenant with Israel. That God revealed Himself to Abraham as *God Almighty*, means that He was for him the Almighty One in love – the love that once stirred at the creation of the world and now also at its redemption. He demonstrated the almighty power of His love in the birth of Isaac from parents who were as good as dead. That omnipotence of His love was revealed as a promise to Abraham and to all the patriarchs – and not only to the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also to the patriarchs of the entire human race from Adam onward. Through that almighty power of His love He would redeem the world in the Mediator. To Moses and the prophets He revealed Himself as *Yahweh*. At that time He showed Himself especially as the Faithful One, Who in that entire unfolding national history for centuries led and accompanied Israel with His grace. Thus the history of Israel is for us a gospel instruction with respect to the history of the kingdom of God in our day and to the end of history.

In this entire advance of the gospel the Mediator – that is, the saving love of God in the Mediator – becomes clear to us. At the same time the gospel is the norm for our believing. From the gospel we know with certainty about the Mediator, and we know who God is for us in Him. We must not imagine a Mediator in a subjectively arbitrary sense, according to what might come up in our hearts about Him. All that arises in our hearts, even if the Spirit of Christ has worked savingly in us, is still influenced by sin and can therefore never provide the norm of the truth for us. Through the authoritative witness of His Word God has cut off all subjective arbitrariness in His kingdom. He has given us the *holy gospel* wherein He reveals Himself holy to us, and maintains Himself in His sovereignty over against all flesh as the One Who alone has full control.

**THE TRUE FAITH**  
**S. G. De Graaf**  
 Translation by Richard Stienstra

## Lord's Day 7

### 20. *Are all men, then, saved by Christ just as they perished through Adam?*

*No. Only those are saved who by a true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all His benefits.*

### 21. *What is true faith?*

*True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word. At the same time it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.*

### 22. *What, then, must a Christian believe?*

*All that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.*

### 23. *What are these articles?*

*I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth  
 I believe in Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, our Lord;  
 He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary;  
 suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell.  
 On the third day He arose from the dead;  
 He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;  
 from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.  
 I believe in the Holy Spirit;  
 I believe a holy catholic Christian church, the communion of saints;  
 the forgiveness of sins;  
 the resurrection of the body;  
 and the life everlasting.*

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## **Speaking by Faith**

If anywhere, certainly in this Lord's Day we need to observe that we can speak about its content only by faith. Since here among other matters is discussed the separation that God has effected among humanity, the election that lies behind this division, regeneration whereby we are passive, and faith as God's gift. Already with the first sentence of the first answer these subjects are suggested as the Catechism responds: *No. Only those are saved who by a true faith are grafted into Christ.* When we do not address these matters from beginning to end by faith, the danger of fatalism threatens instantly. Then we may be tempted to wonder who is elect and who is not, who belongs to one side of the division and who to the other, who will be born again and who will not, who will receive faith and who will not. Then we may also live under the delusion that we can draw a few dogmatic delineations, and yet we really have not touched life itself, for we can only reflect about it by faith. Life always consists of a distinct relationship between God and us, and between us and God, and we can speak about that relationship only when through faith we experience it.

What does it mean then to discuss these matters in faith? It means first of all that we must not converse in the abstract about "the" division, "the" election, "the" regeneration, and "the" faith as gift, but rather about God Who makes division, God Who has elected, God Who regenerates us by His Spirit, and God Who grants faith. And when by faith we see God

in this way, we are immediately involved personally in all those works of God. Then we view ourselves as it were as placed at Christ's right hand; we know about our election, our rebirth, and also our faith. We need to proceed now to focus more specifically on these various subjects.

While we confess according to Scripture, and moreover also confirmed by practical experience, that God brought about a division in the human race, yet we maintain that because of His promise and the covenant of His promise God has a rightful and just claim on all people. After the *No* of this answer we must not forget what was taught in the two previous Lord's Days about Christ, Who assumed *the human nature* and thus became an atoning sacrifice for the whole world. Not only do we then maintain the responsibility of man in this way, but also as soon as we see and acknowledge God's claim on all, according to the covenant of His promise, we are on the right side of the dividing line. Then the preaching of that division is not a pronouncement of a tragedy, but rather it is an exhortation to escape for those who deny God's justice and will certainly perish.

The proclamation that God in sovereign grace has chosen some must not result in a fatalistic perspective of life. The intent and impact of such preaching must be that by means of it, in God's blessing, we are brought to the recognition of the righteousness of His election. Thus, that God calls us to faith must become an honor and a choice for us, so that as soon as we have understood our calling as election, we surrender in faith and learn to discern our own eternal election.

In considering regeneration we need to make a distinction between what God does in us by His Spirit immediately in the opening of our hearts, and what He does for us and to us by His Word. Moreover, we need to focus on the promise of the covenant that in Christ He will grant us true life, and thus regeneration. We must not concentrate on our regeneration, but learn to fix our eyes on Christ. We need to see His kingdom in which He gives life; His kingdom that forcefully gains ground in this world. To be born again is to be gripped by the Spirit and by the Word of His kingdom. As soon as we in faith learn to see Christ and the movement of His kingdom, our regeneration has become a reality. It was in this way that Christ dealt with Nicodemus when He spoke with him about the necessity of being born again.

Faith is a gift of God, but we cannot look at our own faith, rest in our own faith, and believe in our own faith. Believing is in fact looking away from self in order to rest in God's grace in Christ alone. In preaching faith as God's gift we need to be pointed to God's grace and promise in order that in this way God may work and strengthen us in our faith.

These introductory comments are not intended to deny that we need to explain how according to Scripture we must understand God's election, our regeneration, and faith as the gift of God. They are merely meant to warn against an abstract explanation in which we would no longer see God.

### ***The Division in the Human Race***

Through the holy gospel the Mediator is revealed to us and in Him God's redeeming love. The Mediator as the eternal love of God is the beginning, *the Ruler of God's creation* (Rev.3:14), and because God again has turned Himself to His creation, we read that *in Him all things hold together* (Col.1:17). Without the eternal Word that became flesh the world, also the existence of this present world is inconceivable. The reason for the existence of all things is in the Mediator – even now – since *all things were created by Him and for Him* (Col.1:16). Thus the entire world is taken hold of by God's love in the Mediator for deliverance, and also one day the whole world will be delivered by it.

However, that deliverance passes through judgment and catastrophe because sin has dominated in it and still controls it. It has become "the world", which has a *form that is passing away* (1Cor.7:31). That world will be 'redeemed', but it will be saved through a crisis or turning point that already began with the coming of Christ, and one day will be completed.

This crisis also takes place in the human life that is being redeemed. From Christ as the principle and center of the world that crisis passes through the whole world; also the lower creatures are affected by it, while with humans it takes place also with the preaching of the gospel. It begins in the conversion of the heart and life by the Spirit and through the Word of God, while it is to be finalized in the resurrection of the body. For also man's heart and life as evidenced by his body are corrupted by sin.

While the whole world will be saved by the Mediator, it does not mean however that all men will be redeemed by the Spirit and the Word of the Lord. Not all have faith. That is what the catechism posits in its expression that *not all men are saved in Christ as they perished in Adam*. With His redeeming love God rends humanity asunder. There will be a separation between those who are to enter eternal life and those who are destined for everlasting darkness.

The question of why not all are saved by the Mediator cannot be suppressed. With the omnipotence of His love He is able to do all things, is He not? And moreover, the ransom of the Mediator was sufficient for all men, was it not? The fact is that we will never be able to answer that question. On this subject we will always have to return to and rest in God's sovereign good pleasure. Not the wisdom of our heart, but the wisdom of God is veritably true. Thus, when a conflict arises between what our heart dictates and what God's Word teaches us, we shall always have to deny the former and embrace the latter. We must never love our own heart's insight more than we love God, and not ever may we prefer the inclination of our mind at the cost of the Lord's will. As if we could ever imagine ourselves to be closer to the world and to human life than God is, and thus that we could love them more than God does! Moreover, all our love is entirely dependent on God's love, and when it detaches itself from it, it is foolishness and no longer love.

We cannot answer the question of why God through the Mediator does not save all people. However, the fact that not all men come to faith sharply highlights the truth that the gospel was not designed by humans. Just imagine the idea that the Spirit of the Lord as well as faith came to all men. Would we in such a scenario ever come to the full realization that the thoughts of the flesh are enmity against God? Instead of the stubbornness of many and our dissociation from them making us proud of ourselves, such obstinacy constantly points us to our own sin and guilt. The repugnance of many of us can bring us to an ever deeper self-accusation when we according to God's Word challenge this. It alerts us to the antithesis between the gospel and all sinful nature so that we more ardently acknowledge God's sovereignty in His redemption, and live more fully by grace alone.

In daily life it is impossible to overlook the division between those who have learned to live by faith and those who reject the gospel. The antithesis exists, and we need to acknowledge it. Especially in the most important things there is a sharp contrast. Christ said: *Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division* (Luke 12:51). And that division would exist between relatives and even between members of the same family. Surely there is indeed much that unites them: they are after all members of the same family. The fact that such a family can function is the result of the coming of the Mediator and of the love of God in Him. We read: *From the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ the whole family in heaven and earth derives its name* (Eph.3:15). Thus there is also affiliation and association between believers and unbelievers, since they belong to one state, one nation, to the same society, the same company, etc. We must not lose sight of the meaning of that concept of community. However, what divides believers from unbelievers is more than what unites them. To deny that means to disown the miracle of the redemption in Christ, and the tear He rends throughout the human race.

In what measure this antithesis should lead to the formation of separate groups of believers does not need to be considered in this work. There is of course an internal spiritual rupture, and Christ has gathered them to the worship and confession of His church separately. The antithesis that the love of Christ calls forth in humanity comes to expression in the church. Here in any case the existence as a separate community may not be relinquished, and the boundaries between church and "world" must not be erased. Considered from a particular perspective, the church is an antithetical body: she brings to expression the antithesis between gospel and flesh, and also she demonstrates that the Spirit causes some to be born again and submit to the gospel. It is always difficult for us to accept the division of humanity, especially since it is an eternal separation; and because the church brings that division to manifestation she is apt to be hated by the world. Yet we cannot deny that *No* of the catechism.

If only the confession of the *No* and the recognition of the church as an antithetical figure would not degenerate into a mere diagnosis! Against such analytical observation we would properly react. When the apostles state that not all have faith, their hearts are deeply moved by this, not only because of the people who refuse to be obedient to the call to faith and are lost, but especially because of the Mediator Who has a right to all. We have to acknowledge the division as a fact, but we may never do this from a legal point of view. Moreover, we must not take our point of departure from the actuality of the separation, but always from the right of the Mediator. We could – to adduce but one illustration – start with the fact that in our country there are various groupings of people, and we might single out one that confesses the Mediator and another that does not. We could then assert that all public sectors are of significance for societal life, and

that also the Christian sector constitutes an indispensable factor of it. In this way, however, one would have proceeded to reason from the facts.

When that Christian sector would convey the claim that they have eternal life, while in this life they are prepared minimally to exert only a particular kind of influence, the attitude of self-satisfaction may be unavoidable, and we might be able to speak of a sectarian spirit and pharisaic separation. The division is undeniable but at the same time, the just claim of the Mediator on all people must be maintained: He alone has the right of lordship and dominion over all and over everything in our national life, and the connection of the believers must be extended to all. Then such an association is one of engagement. When that community strives for the right of the Mediator and thus for the preservation of all in our nation, and when all in that fellowship live in the awareness that in this contest they serve the Mediator as well as all citizens, the attitude of self-satisfaction is prevented.

However, we may never place national life into the foreground as all-important with the consequence that the antithesis, which affects our lives most profoundly, recedes into the background. Then one would have denied the sole right of the Mediator in our national life. Even less would we wish to wrap national unity in a slogan that is only Christian in pretense. We cannot exchange the confession of the Mediator, Who has come to atone for our sins and Who has caused division, for some “Christian humanist” generality no matter what side offers this.

We stand before the deeply profound: *No*. All are offended by it, and our sinful nature also stumbles over it. For us it brings great difficulties for our involvement in this world. Nevertheless, what we confess by faith we must not deny in practice. We cannot say, “you reject the Mediator and I want to confess Him, yet beyond that we are nevertheless one.” For by this we would put the division brought about by the Mediator into the background, behind the sense of community that exists in other respects. Our whole life stands in the sign of the division, and it is accompanied by suffering in this world. When we accept the confession of the *No*, we take upon ourselves the cross for all of this life.

### ***God's Election***

The reason for the division in humanity is found in God's election. Behind the *No* is the confession of God's election, although the catechism does not mention this expressly. Nevertheless, here is the place in the catechism to consider the doctrine of election.

For us election must never become something like a playful amusement in our thinking, or even produce an abstract debate. We can never truly speak about election except in faith – in faithful submission to God. For then we are not so much discussing election, but God Who has chosen and does choose us. We cannot place ourselves outside of believing in election and then debate it. Then we would make an absurdity of it, and that is abominable. You cannot view the treasures of a museum except when you are inside the building. In the same way, it is only when we personally have faith in God's election and confess it, that it becomes the crowning glory of our life. Then we confess God Who has chosen us.

Moreover, when we live by faith we cannot confess God in any other way than the electing God. In doing so, faith if it is true and consistent always comes to expression. For faith teaches us always to look away from ourselves in order to rest only in God. When by faith we have found God, we also find that for us the beginning and end of life as well as the source and purpose of our salvation are in Him. He must be the Alpha and the Omega for us. Furthermore, the origin of our faith cannot lie in us but must be in God, since if for the origin of our faith we would have to thank ourselves and not exclusively God, faith could no longer be consistent or reliable – and faith cannot be other than consistent. The Arminian, synergistic concept that faith originates with man is a fabrication that no one could ever experience by faith. We would then rely partly on God and partly on ourselves. No one lives like this; by faith, we wholly rely on God or we completely trust in ourselves. We do not deny with this, however, that a believer at times gravitates from one side to the other. However, both cannot exist simultaneously. We must choose daily between God and ourselves in terms of the foundation for our confidence.

Furthermore, we need to confess that God's election is in fact a reality. When we confess it as the reality and not merely as an idea or theory, we acknowledge also its result in the division that it causes in humanity. The revelation of election

is not merely God's claim on us in order that we should understand that our salvation is not from us, nor that we would comprehend God's sovereign decree. It is indeed true that all of that is included in the revelation of election, and it teaches us that *it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God Who shows mercy* (Rom.9:16 NKJ). Moreover, it always directs us exclusively to God. However, if that is to be the fruit of such revelation, by which God distinguishes and divides, election must be fact and not fiction. Only as a reality, and as that which causes the division among humans, does God's election persuade us of the enmity that now exists between God and man, and also teaches us the mystery of the gospel for all men.

In order to confess the just claim of God's election in this way, we do need to accept the fact that after the fall into sin the bond of love no longer existed between God and man – a bond of love in which God revealed Himself as Father to man. The fact that God created man does not in itself entail that God is a Father to that man, and neither does the fact that God created him in His image. Man became God's child when God in His covenant made Himself his Father. Through the sinful rejection of the covenant the father-and-child relationship is completely broken. The reality that God is and remains the Creator does not mean that He continues to be the Father of humans. In the same manner, God cannot be called the Father of the devils, even though He created them once as angels and then called them His children. Through the fall, the father-child relation is completely destroyed.

However, in sovereign love God has once again focused on and addressed Himself to the world and to humanity. Connected with the sovereignty of that action, however, is the fact that He in that love turned to whom He wished. There was no obligation, not a single requirement for justice or for love in His relationship with men. In this way we understand what the apostle Paul writes about the potter and the clay: *Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?* (Rom.9:21). With clay Paul does not mean humanity as such, but fallen mankind. God was no longer obligated in His covenant to any commitment, because that covenant had been broken. Concerning this, He was entirely free to accept one as His child once again, and to leave the other in the fall and have him bear the consequence of his sin.

We acknowledge election as a reality when we also recognize the division of humanity as its consequence. Then we see the Church as the community of the elect. With the confession of the Church as church institute, we will need to distinguish, as Augustine wrote, between the pure and the mixed body of Christ. This however does not mean that the gathering of the church as institute does not constantly remind us of that division.

Nevertheless, through God's election the nucleus of mankind and of the nations is being gathered. To our idea this might not be the best part of it if we sought to pride ourselves on being elected – but then, it was not based on the elect being more desirable than the others. Yet election, although a sovereign act of God, is not an arbitrary deed. The body of Christ that is being saved as an organic whole is the replacement and representation of the entire human race. Thus we can say that all humanity and all nations are saved – they are saved in their elect. God extracts from mankind what is in it, what He by His sovereign deed of creation put in it.

Thus God's call goes out to everyone because He wants to save the nations. There is of course a difficulty in the relation between election and calling; but we are not yet focusing here on the difference between the external and internal call. Furthermore, we are able to approach this relationship between election and calling also only through faith. God's call goes out to all; and when we hear this call by faith, we hear it as election. It is a discrimination and thus election: a being called by faith to God's fellowship in Christ. Those in the parable of the wedding banquet of the king's son, who were invited and refused to come, have not seen their calling as discrimination and election. While those who did respond – not those who allowed themselves to be taken along – have understood the honor of their election and dressed themselves in wedding clothes (Matt.22:1-14). It is in this way that we must hear God's call as discrimination and choosing; and then it also means our election for us.

As far as faith is concerned God's election is a reality, and we discern it not only as from eternity, but we also know a daily election. Thus, Peter writes: *Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (2 Pet.1:10-11). We note that Scripture at times places election after calling. In God's calling we are also chosen daily to be His servants, as well as the servants of all. God's eternal election entails our daily election, and involves our whole life's calling.

When we have come to God as to the One Who has chosen us and does choose us, our whole life stands in the light of that election. What would we then not do to respond to the call contained in that election, and to carry out the purpose that God demands with our election! In this way election is not something that does away with our responsibility, but rather, it highlights that responsibility. Then we have not disconnected election from our calling. We must begin with the hearing of the call and obtain certainty of our election in the hearing and in the pursuit of our calling.

Thus, election did not take place based on God's foreseen faith in us. Election is not the fruit of faith but faith is the result of election, as the apostle Paul indicates: *When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the Word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed* (Acts 13:48). God's reason in electing us lies exclusively in His sovereign good pleasure. Of course, this election must first of all be accepted by us in faith, and only then through faith it comes to its full fruition. Election is not like a draw in the lottery by which our salvation is determined after this life. We must know our election through faith and then this election, that really encompasses our destination and life's calling, begins to lead us more and more consciously.

Even as has been said, we must as we faithfully hear God's call in his Word come to our election – that is, by faith we must hear our calling as election. Hereby all speculations about an intangible, elusive election are cut off, and we are directed to the demand to hear God's call. In this way election is not pushed into the background as of less significance, but instead seeks to control our whole life. Thus the proper way is pointed out to come to a believing awareness of our election. Persons who remain daily in God's calling become increasingly conscious of their election. Those who passively speculate upon the question of whether they have been elected attain neither their calling nor their election.

We have constantly attempted to repudiate one-sided and abstract reflections about election. This needs to happen even more since we are considering the relationship between election and the covenant. In doing so we must proceed from the starting point that we are elected in Christ: *For he chose us in Him [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight* (Eph.1:4). Frequently election has been seen too individualistically. Yet God has chosen a new fellowship, a community in Christ. As was noted above, with the body of Christ as an organic fellowship, humanity is saved. Therefore God determined, principally in Christ, who would be redeemed and that the fullness of blessing that is in Christ would be conferred upon them. For truly, the church is the fulfillment of Him *Who fills everything in every way* (Eph.1:23).

Those who are Christ's are chosen in Him as Head of the covenant. Therefore we must not make a contrast between election and covenant. Christ as Head of the covenant is also the starting-point of election. Therefore the contrast between election and covenant should not be made so that with election we think only of God's counsel, and with covenant only of man's responsibility. Already earlier it was stated that election comprises our total life's calling, and that this is realized by way of faith. Thus election affects our entire life on earth and shows us our responsibility.

Furthermore, God's covenant with His own is not merely in time, for the covenant is made with Christ as Head of those who are His from eternity, since it was only in this way that He, as we noted earlier, could appear as Mediator. Thus when Scripture says *For you know that ...you were redeemed ...with the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake* (1Pet.1:18-20), it must mean that He was known as Head of the covenant before creation. The covenant of grace as it controls our temporal life has as background what took place in eternity between God and Christ as Head of His own. We may never, neither with election nor with the covenant, sever all connection between God's eternal counsel and our own responsibility. Of course it is true that with election we are primarily led to God's eternal decree, while with the covenant we think especially of its historical revelation in which our responsibility is clearly highlighted.

The difference between election and covenant should really be seen in this way: with election the sifting, the differentiation, the divine choice is revealed to us and with the covenant the gathering and the restoration of the human race. We may never forget that the covenant of grace means the restoration of the covenant of God's favor, and that the covenant of grace then sought to encompass once more the entire human race, even if it was with another Head. Within the covenant of grace we find especially God's emphasis and claim on all humanity. Therefore with it we always follow history: how God in ancient times wanted to hold on to the whole human race, how afterward for some time He let the Gentiles walk in their own way, and how the covenant since Pentecost has been directed again to all nations.

With the covenant we think especially of the claim that God wants to place on all nations and on the entirety of people's lives. If indeed election points us to God's separation process, then we must never lose sight of the covenant behind that election. By confessing God's election, we may never dispense with its connection to the whole human race, and the claim of the Mediator upon that race. Thus there is the intent in this answer of the catechism to point us to the separation that exists behind the *No*. When considering the present answer we should not overlook the two preceding Lord's Days in which we confessed the Mediator, and that He assumed *the human nature* and atoned for it. With the confession of the *No* we must not forget to acknowledge the Mediator's just claim on all, nor God's love in Him.

If our election is our election in Christ, then it follows that when we belong to Christ, we are indeed chosen. Above we noted that we obtain certainty of our election by faithfully hearing and following our calling. When by faith we surrender to the promise and to the Mediator of that promise, we surely receive certainty about our election. I do not say that this is a second path next to the first, for in the Mediator our calling and promise are one, for He Who is our calling is also our promise, and vice versa. However, when we through faith embrace Christ, we embrace Him Who is the Head of the elect and we learn to know ourselves in this way as elect so that we may share in God's love. That privilege, which continually amazes us, becomes for us being elected by God.

### ***Our Regeneration***

Behind the *No* of the catechism the election of God, the division that He brought about with it in the human race, God's claim on all humanity in His covenant, and our responsibility must not be forgotten. Concerning those two, God's determination and our responsibility, the entire first answer testifies: *No. Only those are saved who by a true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all His benefit.* The catechism speaks of a passive being grafted into and an active accepting.

We may not say of the relationship between those two that the second merely follows the first, and that being engrafted must be seen only as the preceding blessing, while accepting it only follows that engrafting.

When we accept the Reformed confessions, it cannot be doubted that there is indeed an action of God in us in which we are entirely passive, and that such action comes first. Thus we speak of our heart being opened for the gospel, which wonderful action is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. This does not happen through the Word, and our cooperation therefore is not presumed in this. All that we do, that is, our hearing of the Word, our being open for this, and our focusing on it, is only possible through the prior work of the Holy Spirit directly. This part of our confession is typically Reformed and we must not let go of it. With respect to Lydia, *the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message* (Acts 16:14). This confessional focus is already mentioned now, although it can only be considered more broadly with question 65.

Nevertheless, this direct and immediate work of the Holy Spirit must not be considered in isolation when the confession speaks here of being *grafted into*. That becomes clear already when we are *grafted into Christ by a true faith*. The Holy Spirit works that faith in us not immediately but through the proclamation of the holy gospel. It would be entirely arbitrary if we would think here only of a so-called 'faith capacity' worked in us directly by the Holy Spirit and given to us with the opening of the heart. There is nothing in the catechism that would give us the right to think in this way.

What is meant here with a *true faith* is the faith with which we accept God's Word and embrace Christ. Through that faith, as we are taught here, we are engrafted into Christ. Then, with such incorporation we must not exclusively think of that first direct, immediate deed of the Holy Spirit, but as well we need to keep in mind everything that happens later in our life whereby we also have an active role. Such in-grafting encompasses everything through which we consciously form one body with Christ and live in Him as a branch on the vine. All of that together can be called an incorporation or in-grafting, because everything no matter how active we become in it always has a passive side as well. The passive, however, not only precedes the active; there is also an interaction between these two. Faith is the fruit of God's work, but because we surrender ourselves by faith to Him, we also receive more of His grace, and thus become more fully incorporated into Christ.

When we speak of being *grafted into Christ* we address with it our regeneration, for our incorporation into Christ means being born again. Thus regeneration needs to be viewed in the same way as being grafted into Christ; it cannot be limited to that first deed of God in us, by which He directly and immediately changes our heart and thus also opens it for the Word. With regeneration the Scriptures and our confessions understand God's entire work for the renewal of our lives, and includes thus the gifts of faith and conversion. Christ could therefore say to Nicodemus that he must be born again if he wanted to see the kingdom of God and understand it in measure. One could even envision that work of God in our regeneration stretching out to the resurrection of our body. As such the various actions of God would be included, but those many deeds of God nevertheless together would constitute the one deed of God for our salvation. For that reason it can all together be referred to as our regeneration.

About a child it must then be said that the possibility of regeneration exists, but that he or she could be born again insofar that would be possible with and for such a child. By means of the direct deed of God the heart of the child could be changed and disposed toward the Word of God, although no fruits would be visible as yet.

From this perspective one can also answer the question of immediate or mediate regeneration. When we focus on its beginning in the opening of the heart it is immediate. However, when the perspective takes in more, it is also mediate and takes place by the Word. For not only is there a being born again unto faith, but also in faith and through faith; by faith we receive that grace by which our life is changed more and more. Thus Scripture can say in 1 Peter 1: 23 that we *have been born again ... through the living and enduring Word of God*. To think here of the Word of God in terms of the eternal Word in the sense of John 1:1, is eliminated by what follows: *But the Word of the Lord stands forever; and this is the Word that was preached to you* (1 Pet.1:25).

Moreover, we must view the matter of the relationship between calling and regeneration from this same perspective. There is a calling of God that does not proceed from the preached Word. Even as God once created by speaking, in the same way He also redeems and re-creates by speaking. In fact, He *calls things that are not as though they were* (Rom.4:17). Thus the beginning of our new birth, the opening of our hearts, comes into being through the immediate call of God. Also in what follows, however, regeneration is the result of the calling. We read: *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* (Rom.10:17). But then we must understand with calling the call of the preached and heard Word. In this way we need to see regeneration throughout the process as the result of God's call.

It is improper to limit regeneration to the first opening of our hearts. If we are used to doing so, we make it difficult for ourselves to understand Scripture when it speaks of regeneration, for God's Word uses regeneration in a broader sense, as do our confessions. In fact, Scripture speaks at one point of *the renewal of all things* (Matt.19:28). We should and must of course distinguish between heart and life; and we must confess that our entire renewal starts with the opening of the heart – yet, we need to see that there is interaction and exchange between heart and life.

The first renewal of our heart means a change of approach and therefore of orientation, of direction. When after that first opening of our heart we did not come into contact with the Word of God, and that Word did not conquer us by the power of the Spirit, nothing would indicate that change of our heart. However, if after that first renewal faith was created in us by the Word and the Spirit of the Lord, and thus the beginning of the change of our whole life starts, then the heart's focus on the Word of God would be confirmed by it. In this way the influence of our life affects the heart and therefore we speak of an interaction or exchange.

This does not mean however that regeneration has now become an action from our side, since this is truly impossible. In the full sense of the word, regeneration is a birth we undergo. Regeneration is not restoration. Even when we now want to and actually do things differently, it is still a gift, a renewal that happens to us by God's Spirit and Word – being born again is through Him.

Nevertheless, we need to consider here that this regeneration happens through the Word. Thus, when Christ speaks with Nicodemus about the necessity of being born again, He is not seeking to make a fatalist of him. We must not forget the background to this conversation. Nicodemus thought that as a member of the covenant people, and moreover as a Pharisee and belonging to the Sanhedrin, that by his deeds he had a right to eternal life and could achieve the glory of the kingdom. Over against this Christ wants to make him understand that seeing and entering the kingdom of God presupposes a new birth. The words of Christ, *I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born*

again (John 3:3), lead Nicodemus into depths of despair. However, it is not the dark pit of fatalism, but the depth in which Nicodemus would learn to fear for himself, for his Pharisaic outlook, and for his whole approach to life, in order that these should be completely broken down, and that he by faith alone would learn to live entirely differently.

In this way Christ with His preaching of the necessity of regeneration was causing Nicodemus to be born again. We do not need to keep ourselves occupied with the question of whether the beginning of regeneration, the opening of the heart, had already taken place in Nicodemus, seeing that He came to Jesus. For we confess that while the opening of the heart does not take place through the Word, neither does it happen without connection with the Word, seeing the fact that we have the promise that the action of the Holy Spirit will accompany the preaching of the gospel. And with the preaching of the Word, the Holy Spirit is able to accomplish the opening of the heart and the entering of that Word into the opened heart in one moment. By faith in that promise the necessity of regeneration needs to be preached.

Along with the concept of regeneration being nothing but restoration – a thought raised by some – the idea that with regeneration a new substance is poured into us must be rejected as well. Our regeneration means that we are altered in orientation and direction: both our hearts as well as our life are now directed toward God so that again we may live in fellowship with Him. With regeneration we do not receive something that makes one a super-complete person. This is why we avoid speaking of a new principle of life that would be implanted in us!

That we are engrafted in Christ by a true faith indicates and signifies our regeneration. In connection with the initial changing of our heart so that it is attuned to fellowship with Christ and opened for the Word, faith is created in us by God's Word and Spirit, and our life in Christ begins. Thus, each of us is not first of all born again and then after that grafted into Christ; but our incorporation into Christ constitutes our regeneration. There is no regeneration except from and in communion with Christ. It is being *born of water and the Spirit* (John 3:5). That is, of water in which we are buried with Him into death in order that we as new persons should be raised from it; and of the Spirit, that is of the Spirit of Christ, so that we should live a life in communion with Him.

When our regeneration is a being born of Christ, there is by His coming into the world hope in that new birth. Moreover, regeneration must not be viewed fatalistically as a winning ticket in a lottery: the one who draws it is lucky, and the one who does not is unfortunate. One could conceivably be inclined to consider regeneration in this light when we think of being born again only and exclusively in terms of the first change in disposition, the opening of the heart that precedes conscious awareness. Christ has come into the world, and in Him God wills to give us new life. Thus, Christ must be preached as the beginning of the new life, in order that all the threads that connect us to the old life should be broken off by God's Spirit and Word. This cannot emanate from us, for what comes from us is a continuation in the old line, at best with a slight alteration.

The old direction of life needs to be abandoned totally, and the new one followed. This must happen because it is clear to us that Christ is the only One in whom that can take place. Then the preaching of the necessity of regeneration is intended to serve to break down the old life and to enable us to see Christ. Otherwise we could ask whether the preaching of the requirement of regeneration has any purpose since we are passive in being born again, and also whether such preaching could ever do anything but generate fatalism. In proclaiming the need for rebirth to Nicodemus, Christ with it broke down his pharisaic views by the power of His Spirit, and enabled him to see Him, the Christ, so that he would be susceptible to the preaching of the Kingdom of heaven, especially concerning the heavenly things in it.

This also in measure addresses our becoming conscious of personal regeneration. By itself we cannot be aware of our rebirth. Regeneration brings us the life in Christ, and this we can only verify so to speak by its actions. When we see Christ and by faith in Him become conscious of the bond of faith with Him – of which we will see more in the next section – we also become aware of the new life that we may live in and out of communion with Him.

The question of whether we may pray for a new heart is therefore stated improperly. For if with a new heart we mean the first renewal of the heart that takes place immediately by the Spirit, such a prayer could easily lead to fatalism. However, when with a new heart we mean that change whereby we begin to live anew out of Christ, we should pray for this daily. Such a change of life also really means a change of heart, since there is an interaction between heart and life. Especially in the line of the covenant we may count on such a renewal when that means counting on Christ! We could not speak about regeneration even for one moment without at the same time speaking of Christ. We do not depend on rebirth as a

lot that is favorable for us in the line of the covenant. Instead we depend on, we have to depend on, Christ. And when through His Word and Spirit we learn to count on Him, then the old life is broken off and we live a new life in Him. In this way we speak believingly about our regeneration, that is, by faith looking to Christ. If in our discussion about regeneration we were to avoid involving our faith in Christ, it would result in a fruitless debate and idle speculation.

Finally, we still need to pay some attention to the last words of this first answer: *and accept all His benefits*. Not enough can be said about the regenerated life being a life in and out of Christ, and that only then we believe in Him. We do not in the first place believe in His benefits, but we believe in Him. He Himself is the great gift of God, for He *has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption* (1 Cor.1:30). In Him we share in all of God's gifts. However, we must by a faith that sees and embraces Christ also view ourselves as having received those gifts. For this a certain boldness of faith is necessary, as is pointed out in the words: *and accept all His benefits*. We must dare to accept gifts and know what it is we have. Christ teaches us these matters, and we need to learn them through faith in Him. In fact, we must never look for anything aside from Him, or seek to live without Him. It is by living in Him that we learn this boldness of faith, for fellowship or communion with Him and becoming accustomed to Him increasingly teaches us that this is the fullness of God's love, which causes us to employ such boldness, often without realizing it. Christ Himself teaches us to receive something and to be rich through and with those gifts.

### ***A True Faith***

What has been said about regeneration must also be noted about faith: only when we have faith and are in the faith are we able to discuss it. We can only talk about our faith when we believe. And with 'faith' we mean of course our believing. Also when it comes to faith, we catch it in the act so to speak. We are unable when faith is not active to determine whether one is a believer, for we have neither the insight nor the necessary givens to determine this. It is in the act of faith that we have insight, and in the deed of faith we find also the needed givens. In fact, every non-believing attempt to determine whether I am a believer is bound to fail and is fatalistically circular. Only by faith am I able to know faith.

Thus, faith means faith in Christ – the faith whereby we see Christ. Only when we by faith see Christ are we also able to discern our own faith, because our faith is never alone but it is always a relationship with Christ. It went out from Him and in it He is always the first. We can never rest in nor be content with our own faith, for we do not believe in our faith. When we by faith see Christ we are able through this to perceive and understand our own faith. One could speak here of a returning or a reflexive deed: we first through faith go out to Christ and then by faith return to ourselves and to our own deed of faith. Yet we must be careful in speaking this way. For when we return to or consider ourselves again, it may never suggest that even for one moment we would lose sight of Christ.

Thus when we say that we focus on our own ourselves by faith, we mean that faith by which we see Christ and always continue to see Him. He Whom we see through faith is the light of our lives and in His light we see the light in our own lives. If we were to lose sight of Him even for a moment, there would be darkness in us and no longer faith; nor would we be able to see our life of faith. Through that faith whereby we return to ourselves we always see Christ as well as our own faith at the same time. Without looking at Christ we would perceive nothing of our own faith. It is foolishness to ask whether we really have faith if we do not at the same time through faith see Christ and yield ourselves to Him.

We have spoken consistently about faith as faith in Christ, and this is faith in God as He reveals Himself in grace and love to us in Christ. It is in this way that Scripture speaks about faith. That does not mean that there is no other faith, as though pagans could not have faith. However, the Bible does not designate this as faith since it is not a scientific but a practical book, and comes to us with the contrast: faith or unbelief, wherein faith is either in Christ or a rejection of Him. Scripture does however address the trust and confidence pagans have in their idols. That is also faith, but it is not a Christian faith directed in Christ toward God, but a faith focused on idols. Thus unbelief is not a lack of all faith – for no one is devoid of faith – but rather a wrongly focused faith and not a faith that is in Christ directed toward God.

When Scripture speaks of faith as God's gift, it means that what we receive is faith in Christ. Thus faith as such is not the gift, for faith is a function belonging to the human nature. That ability was not lost when sin came; however it has become corrupted and turned toward idol gods. By God's grace it is thus not a defunct faculty that is being restored, so

that a believing person would have one more capability than an unbeliever, but God graciously restores that ability of faith so that it again has the proper direction and is focused on Him.

In this connection we need to look ahead for a moment at the catechism's approach to question 65. The Holy Spirit works faith in us through the preaching of the holy gospel. We must distinguish here, however, between what the Holy Spirit does with our hearts directly or immediately, and what He does in us through the Word. God does not exclusively work **through** the Word as Luther contended, but He works **with** the Word as Calvin confessed. Thus when Calvin said *with the Word* He meant to distinguish the twofold working of the Holy Spirit, namely that the Spirit changes the disposition of our heart so that it can hear the Word again as the Word of God. But also that it is again focused on that Word, and thus also open for the Word. The Holy Spirit through the Word works in such a way that He makes that Word enter our heart giving us association with it and enabling us to live according to it. Then there is faith in God as He by grace in Christ reveals Himself in His Word.

It is important to consider this distinction somewhat more closely. For should there be but the one work of the Holy Spirit through the Word, then the influence that the Word exercises over our heart and through which faith is produced, would be a power that the Word exerts over us without us having come to an inner agreement and connection with the Word. Then faith would essentially appear to exist under the suggestion of the Word, and for our lives that would mean being bound to the word in a slavish sense. Only when an inner accord with the Word takes place are we free in bowing before and in accepting the Word. Then there is *the freedom for which Christ has set us free* (Gal.5:1).

Following in the footsteps of Luther, many in our day wish to know only of a working of the Holy Spirit through the Word and not of a constant change of our heart as such, through which it is again disposed to understand the Word. We must admit of course that our faith as a deed – our believing – is lacking as soon as the claim of God's Word on our heart is not there. On the other hand, we need to maintain that in spite of that, the disposition toward God's Word as an altered approach granted us by the Holy Spirit endures.

In believing, activity proceeds from two directions: from our changed heart toward the Word, and also from the Word to our heart. It is the former that is being denied by many today. According to what Scripture tells us about the change of heart of Lydia we must confess that there is change of heart which remains and continues, even if momentarily we would not believe. Once our heart has been focused by the Holy Spirit on the Word, it will continue in that direction through a law of inertia even if our ever-present sins hinder it and slow it down with the result that it frequently considers the lie. However, the power of sin is not able to undo what the Holy Spirit once has effected.

Now we are also prepared to consider the question of whether the so-called historic faith, the so-called temporal faith, and the so-called miracle faith are actually faith. With these three kinds of false faith there is also a certain suggestive influence that emanates from the Word toward man, but the heart has not been changed to the degree that an inner affinity with the Word has been established. Thus on the part of man there is not a voluntary submission to the Word, a compliance in which one becomes free. With the historic faith there is a suggestive influence especially on the intellect, with the temporal faith particularly on feelings, and with a miracle faith especially on the will.

Through such suggestions great changes may well take place in a person. Scripture tells us in 1 Samuel 10 that Saul would be *changed into a different person* (vs. 6), and that *God changed Saul's heart* (vs. 9). That change, however, occurred from the suggestion made to Saul and emanated from his call to be king by Samuel. Also that suggestive influence must be ascribed to the Holy Spirit concerning the change that took place in Saul, because we read that *the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power* (vs.6). However, what was missing was the inner change of heart through which man is oriented toward God's Word of grace and love, and by faith he is joined to God Himself. Saul could indeed believe in the welfare of Israel and be dedicated to this, but he did not believe in God as the God of grace for him. In his faith he did not become free. Being inwardly related to God therefore must be viewed as the pivotal difference between a true faith and all other suggestions.

With this we come to the question of the nature of Christian faith: what is faith in Christ – that is, what is true faith? The question is difficult to answer. The catechism discerns a knowing and a trusting in faith. Normally knowing, consenting, and trusting are mentioned. However, when believing is described in terms of a two or three-fold deed, the actual matter of believing is not really defined. We ask therefore: what is the unity, the single root of that two or three-fold deed?

Faith is having an inner certainty because a person is taken hold of by something else, which he then grips and to which he tenaciously clings. The true faith of which we speak is having a certainty and confidence because we have been taken hold of and gripped by God's love in Christ, which we now also embrace and to which we cling.

Thus, faith can be defined as knowing when this is understood in the fullest sense of the word as knowledge in surrender or submission, as knowledge that contains and suggests trust. It is in this way that the Lord Jesus Christ speaks in John 17:3 about knowing when he said, *Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom You have sent.* True faith is always a being bound personally to God in Christ. It is never merely an acceptance of something or of many things, but a trusting of God in Christ, and to 'possess' Him in that certainty. This 'possessing' God in confidence can never take place except God from His side first gives Himself to us and by His love in Christ takes hold of us. Yet there is also a taking hold of from our side, that is, a surrendering in assurance, and in that certainty to own the love of the Lord. One may never say that faith is exclusively a deed from God's side. Without doubt believing means that we are taken hold of by God, but it also means that we cling to Him, for in faith there not only a deed proceeding from God, but conversely also a deed from us.

Should we seek to define the nature of faith even further, we need to take notice of the fact that faith is always brought about because a person attaches or binds himself to the word of him in whom he believes. For faith the word is indispensable. We do not deny with this that true faith is always a believing in God Himself, but we come to God through faith in His Word. The nature of faith in fact entails this. When Adam was first created he took in many impressions of God, but when God began to speak to him he learned to believe in God and thus also came to Him. God has expressed His love in the eternal Word, and that eternal Word is now also the Proclaimer of that love so that we believe the Word of its proclamation and thus come to God. These two, that faith always is a believing in God and that faith always involves the Word, is expressed by the Compendium of the Heidelberg Catechism when it defines faith as *a certain knowledge of God and of His promises revealed to us in the gospel.* We know God in His promises.

We must see this in its full effect, namely that faith always is a believing in God and a surrender of ourselves to Him. In faith God comes first – our all in all. That we believe in God means that He forms the center of our lives. We believe in His honor, in the glory of His name, and in the victory of His Kingdom, and not in the first place in our own salvation. Too often our own salvation is still central in our lives. By faith we have come to God and not in the first place to our own salvation. This cannot be said enough, for in this respect much in us and among us has yet to change.

However, we cannot deny that through faith we ourselves are directly involved, even if it is only our desire that God should receive the honor that is due to Him and that His kingdom should conquer. Moreover, coming to God constitutes for us our own salvation. Scripture reveals that by faith we become directly involved, stating that *faith is being sure of what we hope for* (Hebr.11:1). With true faith we are always involved in hope. Faith in God's Word is not the same thing as having faith in someone's announcement which does not involve me. With the gospel my entire life is at issue. Moreover, the gospel always focuses on the relationship of God and the world and of God and me, and it addresses that relationship. Since we belong to God there must be based on God's intention, a relationship of love and responding love between Him and us. Thus we are involved and drawn into this from start to finish.

Nevertheless, in His Word God has many things to say against us, in that He often accuses us especially of unbelief and turning away. There is also a lack of love and even an inclination to hate God and our neighbor; and yet love is always dependent on faith and trust. For that reason the first and most serious thing of which God accuses us is unbelief. For such a judgment of God in His Word we have to humble ourselves and must agree. Thus in addition to knowledge, we distinguish agreement in faith. This then is an agreement with God's sentence against us.

In this matter we need to keep in mind that such agreement is a fruit of our knowledge of God and part of it. Because we know God in love, His judgment speaks to us and affects us. In this it is not possible to speak of agreement if God's judgment has not affected us in any way. But we can speak of concurrence when we are crushed because of what we have done against God. Imagine that we had not come to God in faith and love; would we then still hear His judgment since it is really the judgment of His rejected and offended love? What penetrates our hearts is the tone of the accusation of that love which has been treated unjustly.

Combined with that is the acceptance and trust of the promise of the forgiveness of our sins. Therefore in faith, along with knowledge and agreement, confidence or trust is mentioned as the third factor. What is meant here especially is confidence in the promise of the forgiveness of our sins, of the reconciliation with God, and of His grace and communion. This trust is coupled with the agreement, and thus we cannot say that confidence follows consent or agreement later on, namely that we confess our sins only in as far as we have learned to hope in forgiveness. As long as God for us is a distant, remote God Who only opposes us, we are not able to confess our sins from the heart. Agreement and confidence are jointly the fruit of knowing God. As soon as we have seen Him in His love in Christ, we fall down before His verdict and also hope for His forgiveness. Thus we are able to distinguish knowing, agreeing, and trusting, but they are together in the one deed of faith.

It is in this way that faith is defined as it now occurs in the sinful but regenerated man. However, there was also a life by faith for Adam before the fall into sin, which Christ has overcome by faith. Of course in Adam's faith we cannot speak about agreeing and trusting in the sense we addressed the matter earlier. However, when we begin with the thought that faith through which we are now saved is not an addition to our nature, but that on the contrary faith belongs to our nature as a general human function, we must conclude that except for the knowing, something of the agreeing and the trusting, was found in that faith of Adam. Thus Adam consented to the claim that God in His love had on him, and he trusted in the promise that God would grant him His favor and love for ever. Precisely in that faith Adam was tested and failed. Although faith has received a different content now, in its essential nature it has not changed. Also in this respect God's grace does not add anything to nature, but restores nature.

After all of this it should be clear that the knowing, agreeing, and trusting of our faith are not to be separated from each other. We cannot know God without trusting and believing the promise that He forgives us our guilt. Without that trust or confidence we can have some knowledge or information about God, but nevertheless we do not know Him. There is a difference between "having knowledge of" and "knowing". We could have received our information from a third party, but knowing always presumes the encounter. When we through faith meet God in His Word, we bow our heads before the judgment of His love we see in Him, and we dare not refuse to trust the promises that come to us in the love extended to us. Thus there can be no agreement with that judgment without having the trust and confidence in the promise of forgiveness. Knowing, agreeing, and trusting are together given in our faith. Therefore we may not draw conclusions from the fact that the catechism only after the *confidence* states that *the Holy Spirit works [this faith] in my heart by the gospel*. From the fact that when confessing a *sure knowledge*, the work of the Holy Spirit is not yet mentioned, we may not deduce that the catechism was not from the very beginning intending to convey a knowing of God that was received in meeting Him. That our confession speaks here of *I accept as true*, is certainly convincing evidence of this.

Although knowing, agreeing, and trusting are supplied jointly, they are not constant or always present in us but do vary together. Sometimes as a natural process they are entirely absent; yet they also mature together. When a person experiences growth in faith, all three increase jointly; however a period of decline takes place as well. We may observe variations of progress and weakening, of great acts of faith and of a total absence of such deeds of faith. In considering these distinctions we use as starting point the thought that confidence, the certainty concerning our own salvation, is just as strong as knowledge. Confidence or trust can sometimes be absent, but then also God often is a remote God.

Some have made distinctions that proceed from other presuppositions, namely that of the being and the well-being of faith, or that of a shelter-seeking and an assured faith. Belonging to the essence of faith would then be the knowledge of God, and that would be present while the acceptance of God's promises and the assurance about one's own faith in which the well-being of faith would exist would be absent. Thus while also the refuge-seeking in God would presuppose knowledge of God, it would be possible however that the assurance of one's own salvation might not exist.

Speaking in general, the making of such distinctions frequently depicts that we are too occupied with our own faith, our own activity of faith. This in turn would then point to a lack of a wholesome faith. When a person has a healthy eye he knows little of that eye, but a lot of the outside world which he observes with his eye. When his eye is sick he sees the outside world poorly, but his attention is concentrated especially on that eye. We know that when we have a healthy faith, we speak a lot about God's grace in Christ and little about our own believing. But as soon as our faith is sick, our attention shifts mostly to that faith. Moreover, we need to observe that the Scriptures do not reveal abstract things to us about God, but always speak within the relationship of God to us and about that relationship. Thus, I cannot know God except in His relationship to me, that is, in the relationship of His love in Christ, which love also judges my life.

In the measure then that I know God by faith, I know that I am taken hold of by Him in His love, and there is then an agreeing and trusting, for we are not able to know the judgment of love without our agreement, and we cannot know the atonement through His love without trust. No more is there trusting without knowing, than there is a knowing without trusting. We know God in as far as we have trust or confidence in Him. That knowing and trusting must not be separated, Scripture tells us in Psalm 9: 10: *Those who know Your name will trust in You, for You LORD, have never forsaken those who seek You.*

Thus this distinction between the being and well-being of faith cannot be made; that is, the distinction in which one considers with the being of faith the knowing of God, and with the well-being is meant the assurance of one's own salvation. Trusting is always a confidence in God that exists immediately when we know Him. In addition, the distinction between faith as an asylum and a confident faith cannot be maintained either. In so far as we truly take refuge in God, and know Him in that deed, we are also confident of His grace of which He speaks to us in His Word. A person could attempt to take refuge in his own feelings, or in his own prayer, or in his own faith, or in the tradition of the church, but that is not seeking shelter in God. It is possible also to think one is taking refuge in God when without faith he tries out something on God, but then there is no sanctuary-seeking faith either.

Faith in God – and that alone is true faith – immediately produces certainty of one's own faith, even as it involves bowing before the judgment of His love on our sins, and discontinuing those sins. We also cannot seek refuge in God while continuing our sins, for faith means a total surrender to God.

In the same way as was pointed out above with respect to the distinction between the being and well-being of faith, the distinction between the so-called objective and subjective doubt is also and equally untenable. This distinction intends to convey that a person is able to believe in God and thus have certainty of His "objective" existence, while he doubts in his own "subjective" sharing the salvation in Christ. There would thus only be subjective doubt. Objective doubt is then called the doubt in the existence of God, in the coming of Christ, and in the truth of His Word. However, what really is the meaning of that "objective" certainty in view of the "subjective" doubt? In such a case they do not want to doubt the existence of God, but given the measure of their belief in the coming of Christ, and in the truth of God's Word, that faith means nothing more than to have a particular assumption, and it does not believe with a changed heart, which is the faith wherein we are liberated. Also with respect to the coming of Christ and to the truth of God's Word they do not have inner certainty. We are able to know God's grace in Christ only while it seizes us and as it holds on to us.

What determines everything in this matter is the question of whether God's Word really speaks only within the relationship between God and us, and whether there it addresses that relationship. This question cannot be considered until in the next Lord's Day.

### ***What Must a Christian Believe?***

We stated already that by faith we know God in His Word. Faith relates to the Word and meets God in His love in the Mediator there. Thus we confess in the catechism that it is necessary for us to believe *all that is promised us in the gospel*. In the gospel we are not only told about God's grace, but it also comes to us in it. He Who directs us to preach that gospel is Himself the eternal Word in Whom the fullness of God's love is expressed.

We find that gospel, that proclamation of Christ, throughout the holy Scriptures: in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. It began with the mother promise; and we do not view any page of the Scripture in the correct light, if we do not see Christ there. The entire history announced in Scripture, also in the Old Testament, is revelation of Christ. He lived in that history, controlled it, and placed His stamp on it; and He appears for us all not only in the gospels, but also in the acts of the apostles. We can also say of the history of the world after the special revelation has been completed, that it is controlled by Christ and that He is revealed in it. However, that history is not written and illuminated for us by God Himself; that is why we must always be careful in determining how Christ is revealed in it. Yet, in Scripture Christ is as it were painted before our eyes, not only in the historical sections but also in the other parts.

It is in this way that we maintain a closeness between Christ and the Scriptures. The Bible is not merely a book about Christ, but it is also written by Him through the inspiration of the prophets and the apostles. It is a book by Christ about Himself. Thus He comes to meet us in that book as the fullness of God's love.

We need not return at length to what was said in the previous Lord's Day about the gospel as the content and the norm of our faith. In the gospel the love of God meets us, which is the source and meaning of our existence, and therefore we must accept it in faith now that God in the Mediator anew turns to us in that love. Thus the gospel does not merely tell us what we may believe, but what we **must** believe and **how** we must believe. It is the content and norm of our faith. The Compendium conveys this when it asks: *What is the summary of that which God has promised in the gospel and commanded to believe?* What we see expressed here is that a promise is the content, and a command the norm of our faith.

God's Word is the Word from and about God from Whom we are estranged by nature. That is why it is difficult for us to understand and heed it as the Word of God, for although it comes from God, by nature we do not consider it reliable and accurate, nor divinely true. By nature we do not recognize God's voice in it. When we by God's Spirit once again have been disposed and inclined toward God as our Father, we recognize the voice of God as that of our Father, although all estrangement has not disappeared immediately. That the Bible is often so difficult for us is no doubt due in the first place to the fact that it is a book from God and about Him, Who far exceeds all our thoughts. Yet the primary reason for our difficulty is that we are estranged from God and no longer understand His will and words. Only when by His Word and Spirit we have once again a meaningful relationship with the Lord as our God and Father, the formerly hidden things become clear to us. Then it will not be those with the sharpest intellect and those highly educated who understand the Bible best, but they who have the closest fellowship with the Lord. God has *hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children* (Matt. 11:25), that is to those who with a childlike faith know that fellowship.

It is a blessing for us since we have such difficulty in understanding and accepting God's Word that it comes to us as the norm of our faith, and thus it must be believed. Because we submit and subject ourselves to it, Scripture opens itself to us and becomes understandable. It is our rebellion and self-determination with respect to God that causes it to be closed to us. In faith there is always submission, and in such compliance we come to know God.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that God has revealed a doctrine to us in His Word to which we should blindly submit in slavish obedience. The idea that God in His Word should have given us a dogma – as espoused by the Roman Catholic Church – must necessarily produce a different and reactionary thought, namely that God in Christ has given us His life, and that the Bible does not need to be accepted as an authoritative document. We reject both those ideas because the Word of God itself brought us to the confession that in the Bible we have the Word of our Father in heaven. That Word as such therefore has authority for us, because it is the Word of His love, and it liberates us in faith. And then we learn to cherish it.

However, because that Word is the norm of our faith we are able to derive a confession, a doctrine of faith, from it. The church has a calling to affirm that norm for our faith in her confessions, as we demonstrated with the first Lord's Day. She did that first in the twelve articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith, the Apostles Creed. For this the church received the authority from God, so that His Word would be spared from arbitrary explanations and from manipulation. The service that the church, in keeping with her obligation, performs for the Word is of great significance. We are all guided by this confession of the church, even those who reject its ecclesiastical authority and turn to sects for their salvation. But even sects benefit from the historical development of the church's confessions.

These confessions with their ecclesiastical authority do not hinder or impede God's Word with its authority, but express this in a special form for us. In the same way that a country with good laws must give expression to the divine right for a distinct life in that country, and as the ethical rules functioning in the family must bring the law of love to manifestation, so also the confessions of the church give expression to the norms for our faith contained in God's Word. For our faith life this is invaluable. Therefore, however highly we esteem the church's confessions, we may never treat them as the formulated laws for faith lest it petrifies our faith and die out in the following generations, but we must always listen to God's Word as the Word from our heavenly Father wherein He speaks to us and He Himself comes to us.

The content of our faith may thus never become a memorized lesson, for then it is in fact not the substance or essence of faith. Through faith we have a living link with the love of God that the Word tells us about, along with everything it communicates to us about that love. The peculiar thing about faith is that it is dependent on its own content, which it creates by its own substance. Of course, *faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of God* (Rom.10:17). Therefore the opening of the Word makes faith stronger and richer in us and increasingly takes deeper root. This may never be seen in such a way that we initially have a simple faith in Christ, and that then in order to be a confessing member of the church, it is helpful that we increase our knowledge of the Bible and the confessions. Then that knowledge would be added to faith and would undoubtedly form an annoying burden for it. The church's instruction in the Scriptures and the confessions is intended to be a means to bring faith to development; however, faith without content or substance is unthinkable.

There is variation in the measure of knowledge. With respect to faith that is not indifferent, even though the level of knowledge is not a determinant for the depth of faith. There may be people who understand very little but who with it have a very deep understanding of faith; they have a very solid faith. Yet, without any knowledge faith cannot exist, for the encounter of faith with God always includes knowing His love in the Mediator. Nobody can suffice with an ignorant and minimalist faith using the statement, "I believe what the church believes," the explanation certain backward coalminers in Italy gave, even though they knew nothing of what the church believed. Faith is always a personal bond with God's Word in the measure we know it.

However, it is proper that we believe, and know, and confess the fellowship of the church to which the Word of God was spoken. When we place ourselves outside of the fellowship of the church we will misunderstand it, because the church is the communion created by God's Word and to which it is addressed. If we actually would want to put ourselves outside the pale of that fellowship, we could indeed take some expressions from God's Word as if they applied only to ourselves and use them in leaving. However, that is theft from Scripture and from the church; and we would never be able to understand God's Word in its unity and cohesion. All so-called knowledge of the Bible is not yet truly a knowing of God's Word of the covenant between Him and His people, as God enriched that Word while He gave it during the history of that covenant. That the Word of God is the Word of covenant between Him and His people, comes to clarity as well in the confessions of the church.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 8****24. How are these articles divided?***Into three parts:**the first is about God the Father and our creation;**the second about God the Son and our redemption;**the third about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification.***25. Since there is only one God, why do you speak of three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?***Because God has so revealed Himself in His Word**that these three distinct Persons**are the one, true, eternal God.****God in His Works and God as He is Eternally in Himself***

There is a certain tension in this Lord's Day. In the first answer we read about God and His works, namely of God the Father and our creation, God the Son and our redemption, and God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. In this we see God as He has revealed Himself in His works. In the second answer we learn of three Persons Who are in God. In the second answer the works of God are no longer mentioned; and in doing so we tend to think automatically of the relationship between the three Persons. In this Lord's Day we come from one to the other: from God as He reveals Himself in His works to the divine Being Himself, and then with respect to the latter, not to God's attributes but to the internal relations within God.

The question here comes to mind whether we are able to know God as He eternally is in Himself, not considering the relationship in which He has placed Himself to His creatures, and they to Him. Can our knowledge rise beyond what He has revealed about Himself in that relationship? Do we know what God is like eternally in Himself, aside from that relationship? And if that were the case, what would we benefit from that knowledge and be able to do with it? Could we enlarge that knowledge with reasoning, and could we with what is given us be able to draw further conclusions? Would we be able to go ahead and work with that knowledge?

In connection with the present Lord's Day the question needs to be phrased in this way: Do we know only of a revelational Trinity or also of an ontological Trinity? Do we see God in His revelation in history as three Persons, or do we also know enough to speak of the way the three Persons eternally relate to each other, aside from the creation of the world? It is clear that the one is something different than the other.

It is impossible to deny that the church has confessed certain things concerning the eternal relationship of the three Persons internally. Already in the Nicene Creed she articulated that the Son is *the Only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father*. The same creed confesses that the Holy Spirit *proceeds from the Father and the Son*.

In the Athanasian Creed the church makes an even broader confession: *The Father is from none, not made nor created nor begotten. The Son is from the Father alone, not made nor created but begotten. The Holy Spirit is from the Father and the Son, not made nor created nor begotten but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less, but all three Persons are co-eternal with each other and co-equal. Thus in all things, as has been stated above, both Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity must be worshipped. So he who desires to be saved should think thus of the Trinity.*

The church could really not do otherwise than confess such matters, for all of her members were baptized into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus when she understood the Scriptures to say that there was but one only God, she had to come to the confession of the Trinity. And because the Scriptures also taught her to say that God is unchangeable, she had to come to the acknowledgement that God was eternally a triune God in Himself, apart from the creation of the world. Moreover, the Scriptures do teach us something about the internal relations of the Persons of God, even if it were only in the names with which the Persons are designated. Of this as well the church must understand that those names are not only an expression of the relationship of those Persons to the created world, but also what They are in Their internal relations. And in certain expressions Scripture also displays something to us of the eternal relations of the Persons.

Moreover, that is in agreement with the fact that Scripture in other places does say something of Who God is in Himself, as for example when it reveals to us that *God is not served by human hands as if He needed anything* (Acts 17:25), where the sovereignty and self-sufficiency of God are clearly placed before us. In general, when the Scriptures speak of God's transcendence above all created matter, as in His immutability and His eternity, they do shed some light on the divine Being as He eternally exists in Himself.

Now the question is, why does Scripture reveal these things to us and what can we do with them? In doing so does it speak of the relationship between God and His world, which relationship finds its acme in the covenant between God and man, and does it then say something else about that relationship? Does it seek to impart to us something not related to this matter? Scripture does not communicate in the abstract, does it? It certainly does not do so when dealing with God's self-sufficiency but notes that God is not served by human hands as if He were in need. When Scripture seeks to reveal something of what God eternally is and does, it does this so that we better understand the relationship between God and us in order that we more fully comprehend the covenant relationship. We are what we are only in that relationship and not outside of it. The covenant relationship can be a blessing or a curse for us, but our life is caught up and consumed in that relationship and draws its meaning and purpose from it.

It is not that way with God. His existence is not limited to that relationship, but He also exists by Himself independent of it. In fact, Scripture shows us that such a relationship viewed from our life is a necessity, but not as seen from God's existence. That God created that relationship and in our creation inclined and disposed us to it, was a deed of God's sovereign will in keeping with His eternal decree. We need to know this if we want to understand the nature of that relationship properly, for in it we can never give to God that which He not already had in Himself, since in the covenant our entire being as well as the praise we render Him in it all comes from Him. It is necessary that we know this so that we may honor and serve Him in the proper way.

For us therefore God's grandeur and splendor above all that is created – His transcendent majesty, His eternal Self-existence – is the background and assumption of everything that we confess about Him and about ourselves in that relationship. It is in this way alone that we come to a humble adoration that earns and deserves nothing; and thus we come to our complete dependence on Him in that relationship. And in this way alone our confidence as reliance on Him, Who is not dependent on anything outside of Himself, can be genuinely true. Thus we cannot arbitrarily increase our knowledge of Him as He exists eternally in and by Himself through reasoning, for then we would be guilty of idle speculation. We have to limit ourselves entirely to what the Scriptures tell us about this. Such knowledge of God is merely background, supposition, and boundary of everything that we may know about God in His relationship with us. The revelation of Scripture about God as He is eternally in Himself serves only to illuminate Who He is for us.

We must therefore cut off every attempt to reason further about what God is like in Himself. We may never seek to devise any description or definition of God's Being, for if we would define God as the absolute Being or as the absolute Mind, we would sin against Him. God in His eternal existence eludes our thinking, and since to define means to confine, how could we ever do that with the Infinite One? Even of His ways with us we must always conclude: *How great is God – beyond our understanding!* (Job 36:26). Also: *And these are but the outer fringes of His works; how faint the whisper we hear of Him! Who then can understand the thunder of His power?* (Job 26:14).

How often Calvin warns against that spirit in His Institutes! We provide here a few quotations. *Those, therefore, who, in considering this question, propose to inquire what the essence of God is, only delude us with frigid speculations; it being much more our interest to know what kind of Being God is, and what things are agreeable to His nature. For, of what*

*use is it to join Epicurus in acknowledging some God who has cast off the care of the world, and only delights Himself in ease? What avails it, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do? The effect of our knowledge rather ought to be, first, to teach us reverence and fear; and, secondly, to induce us, under its guidance and teaching, to ask every good thing from Him, and, when it is received, ascribe it to Him. For how can the idea of God enter your mind without instantly giving rise to the thought, that since you are His workmanship, you are bound, by the very law of creation, to submit to His authority? Or that your life is due to Him, and that whatever you do ought to have reference to Him? (I, ii, 2)*

*Here we may observe, first that His eternity and self existence are declared by His magnificent Name twice repeated; and, secondly, that in the enumeration of His perfections, He is described not as He is in Himself, but in relation to us, in order that our acknowledgement of Him may be more a vivid actual impression than empty visionary speculation (I, x, 2). At the beginning we have said that the knowledge of God is not in idle speculation, but entails service of Him (I, xiii, 1).*

The Belgic Confession also does not provide a separate description of God as He is in Himself, but a summary of God's attributes in Art.1. And even if in it God's attributes in His transcendent majesty are mentioned, they suggest immediately how He relates to us: *We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is only one God, Who is a simple and spiritual Being; He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.*

Furthermore, in Art.8 and 9, the articles about the divine Trinity, repeated mention is made already in the very first reference to the three Persons of who God is in the three Persons for the world and for us. In Art.8: *The Father is the cause, origin, and beginning of all things visible and invisible. The Son is the Word, the wisdom, and the image of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might Who proceeds from the Father and the Son.* Art.9 starts with the remarkable words: *All this we know both from the testimonies of Holy Scripture and from the respective works of the three Persons, and especially those we perceive in ourselves.* One almost gets the impression that in addition to Holy Scripture an inner experience is indicated as a source of knowledge. However, in a Reformed confession where all subjectivism is rejected, this could not possibly be meant. Still, what is expressed is that we can only know the three Persons of God in the relationship we have with Him, even as also the Scriptures only speak within that context. In the middle of that Article we are admonished to be careful with these words: *Although this doctrine far surpasses all human understanding, nevertheless in this life we believe it on the ground of the Word of God, and we expect to enjoy its perfect knowledge and fruit hereafter in heaven.*

With respect to the divine Trinity we come therefore to the conclusion that through the testimony of the Scriptures we do know something about the eternal existence of the three Persons of God. And also with respect to their internal relations we have learned something, but that this is revealed to us in order that we should more fully know our own relationship to the three Persons. The Scriptures make us understand that behind the special nature of our relationship to each of the Persons is the distinctiveness of the eternal existence of the three Persons themselves, so that we would understand that in their relations to us there is nothing accidental but that these have eternal backgrounds.

That the Father in love wants to be our Father finds its source in the fact that He from eternity is Father in God. And that through the Son all things were made in the reflection of the Father is so because the Son sees the Father eternally opposite Him; while the fact that the Holy Spirit goes out to the world and to us is because from eternity He proceeds from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father. If we see the difference and the connection between what God is eternally in Himself and what He is in His works in this way, then we perceive on the one hand the tension in this Lord's Day, but also on the other hand something of its clarification and resolution.

### ***Believing and Knowing***

That Scripture always speaks within and about the relationship between God and us is necessary if in faith we wish to understand all it says. Faith means that one has a special relationship with God and this cannot be anything other than a pursuit of the relationship God intended and stipulated. Outside of that relationship faith knows nothing, but in it through that faith we come to know God, also when we learn that His existence is not exhausted in it. Only through this faith and

living in that fellowship with God do we come to know ourselves. By faith we know God and ourselves at the same time, as Calvin in his Institutes begins to say; that is, through faith we know God and ourselves in our mutual relationship.

When we keep that in mind all the time and live by it, we are protected from objectivism as well as subjectivism. Objectivism is a lie, for we cannot really say anything about God through faith except we ourselves are involved. In fact, other than involving ourselves we cannot understand anything about God as true, and whatever we would discuss and conclude concerning God and His relation with this world outside His covenant with man would be a lie and a futile philosophy. Furthermore, on our own and from ourselves we are not able to say a true word about God, for we exist only in the covenant relationship with God, a relationship established by God's Word and thus also explained only by that Word. Therefore, since we know God only in that fellowship, we can only speak about Him in truth through His Word. It is in this way that our faith for all its knowledge is dependent on God's Word.

This so-called objectivism could be accompanied by a certain legalism. It does not know God's Word as the Word of God's fellowship, nor the law as rule of life in that fellowship. Yet, out of a kind of honesty it may want to maintain the law, but only in its external sense. Thus, the legalism of so-called objectivism expresses itself in an outwardly obedient church life.

However, subjectivism also is able to display a particular kind of legalism. It also does not honor God's Word but in pride assigns itself a law. Such self-imposed lawfulness can never bring freedom, and this legalism comes from a certain fear, and therefore the legalism of subjectivism expresses itself often in voluntary denials and world avoidance.

Thus both so-called objectivism and subjectivism reveal pride. The so-called objectivism believes it can speculate about God outside of the relationship He established between Him and us and between us and Him. Subjectivism thinks it can be its own master. Because both are rooted in pride, they are also able to occur together in combination. Idle speculation about God however does not satisfy one's feelings; but this deficiency is then compensated for by imagining that a person is able to produce something on his own, which must in such instances serve as sensitive fellowship with God.

It is true that the so-called objectivism and subjectivism do not yet always denote mysticism. Nevertheless, this does appear in an extended sense of both. For in mysticism there is always a tendency to remove the boundaries between God and us and to attain a certain oneness of man with God. We do not yet always find that with the so-called objectivism and subjectivism. How can a man reason with God Who is eternal in Himself, unless he were equal to God or at least divine in his intelligence? Moreover, how would a man out of himself come to have fellowship with God, unless his innermost being – his soul's essence – were divine? Only if there is something divine within man himself does the possibility exist for potentially establishing a certain oneness with God. Thus there is an intellectual as well as a sensitive or impressionable mysticism, but both proceed from an arrogant disdain of the way of the covenant and of a faith in the Word of the covenant.

Faith also entails knowledge, for when by faith we meet God we meet Him as we are, as a whole person – which includes our knowing. All our knowledge remains under the guidance of faith no matter how much it develops itself. Outside of believing in God's Word we truly know nothing. Faith is not a step in a staircase that precedes each higher degree of learning. We may not think that faith is not intended for the non-developed and uninitiated in the congregation, while the church's spiritual members are on the stairway of knowledge. Rather, faith ever remains the requirement for all our true spiritual knowing and learning.

In addition, there is no true communion or fellowship with God without faith, for there is an awareness and experience in God's fellowship. In fact, Scripture frequently refers to this. Thus there is being close to God and being far from Him. Yet, all experience of God's fellowship is by faith. As such it is a communion in which the aim is not an actual oneness with God. The faith by which we live in God's covenant on the one hand recognizes the distance from God by Whose sovereign majesty the covenant was established, and us. And on the other hand such faith brings us to the most intimate covenant communion with God. This fellowship expresses itself in a mutual exchange of the most intimate love and a desire to sense the same, to want the same, and to intend the same as God. In that sense we are one with God, and that is for a believer the greatest treasure.

Thus it is in this way that we know God in His relationship to His creatures, in His works and in the fruit of His works; in His creation, redemption, and sanctification – or to say it differently, in His creation and re-creation. Then we see this world, that is, all of God’s creatures not in themselves, but we see them in their relationship to God Who has created and Who re-creates. Then we see this world by faith. Now, of course we can also discern it on its own, but then we do not see the world as it really and truly is, for then we cannot understand it in its meaning and purpose.

To know God in the way of His relationship with His creatures and of His creatures to Him, never proceeds from those creatures only. For this we need God’s Word to illuminate all of creation, since through the Word we come to know the proper relationships. We have no doubt that a certain knowledge of God exists among the pagans, but we would never find authentic and true knowledge of God among them. Calvin notes that we can never read the book of nature without the glasses of Scripture. In particular this is true when the background of the relationship between God and us is involved, namely what God eternally is in Himself; and thus we cannot say a truthful word without the revelation of Scripture. Therefore the last answer of the catechism states that *God has so revealed Himself in His Word that these three distinct Persons are the one, true, eternal God*. What could we really know about the Holy Trinity without His Word?

Supernaturalism as found especially in the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches that a certain pure, universal knowledge of God may be obtained from nature by man’s reason, not only God’s attributes of which He has put some similarities in His creatures, but also those in which He totally differs from His creatures. By way of negation they believe that they are able to discover these latter attributes. We deny that God in any way shares the dependence or the changeability of creatures, and thus we conclude that God is independent and unchangeable. But they teach that with this natural knowledge of God we obtain through our reasoning from nature, a certain addition that is supposed to come as the above-natural or supernatural knowledge of God that we receive through faith from the Scriptures. Knowledge of the Holy Trinity would then notably belong to this supernatural knowledge of God.

However, it is not meant this way when we say here that through the Word of God we come to know His Triune nature. Through supernaturalism neither the relationship between knowledge and faith, nor between God’s works and His Word is acknowledged properly. Knowledge is no more of a higher order than faith, than faith is an addition to knowing through reason. Knowledge through reason is not a general portal to the more intimate hall of faith, but faith must control all our knowledge of God from the very beginning. Thus God’s Word is placed not merely as a higher source of knowledge above that of nature, but for us God’s Word casts light on the entire relationship of God to nature, how He created it and how He recreates it. Therefore, without faith in God’s Word about God and the world in their mutual relationship we cannot know anything for certain.

### ***The Triune God and the Creation of the World***

This Lord’s Day is paramount because it approaches most nearly what God eternally is within Himself. For that reason it is also the most difficult one. Yet, everything the Scriptures tell us about God’s eternal existence has relevance for His creatures. Therefore this Lord’s Day, in connection with the division of the Apostles’ Creed proceeds from the question Who God is in His works. And when we say “Who” God is, we mean God as He reveals Himself to His creatures, making us share in His fellowship.

But how could a confession of the church speak differently about God? With this confession someone who in ancient times had come to the church from paganism confessed his faith as he was about to be baptized. He would be baptized in the Name of the Triune God, and what else could be asked of him than that he believed in the Triune God? That was then the Triune God as He revealed Himself in His works of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Such a person would then confess his faith in the Triune God as the living God Who gives Himself to us in His works. Thus we need to take our point of departure in the actual content of this Lord’s Day in God and His works, as He reveals Himself in His works as the Triune God.

In Romans 11 the apostle Paul concludes his reflections of chapters 9 to 11 about Israel and its future with the words: *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever!* (Rom.11:36). We must not separate these words from those considerations. For from and through and to that God Who in leading Israel’s history in the

faithfulness of His covenant reveals Himself as the living God, are all things. However, these very living words of Paul can be killed conceptually by having a great many logical discussions about them that have nothing to do with faith.

By faith we know God as the living God Who intends to grant us His fellowship. Through faith we understand according to Scripture that such fellowship or communion is the epitome of what God planned, for in that communion He glorifies Himself the most. Thus Scripture can say of God that He is the truth, or that He is love and it would surely not enter into our minds that the Bible with that defines the Being of God. No more than a description such as “the absolute being” or “the absolute mind” is acceptable, may we consider these expressions of Scripture as a sort of definition. For us God is truth, that is, always faithful to the Word of His favor, and therefore the solid foundation of our lives. As well, for us God is love, meaning both that He maintains the justice of His love and that He gives Himself to us.

That God is truth and love does therefore not in the first place indicate what He eternally is in Himself, even though we must see this background, but rather what He in His eternal counsel is with respect to us. The fact that He is truth and love for us comes from His eternal counsel in which He decided to be that for us because He determined to grant us His fellowship. From and through and to that God, Who decreed to be that for us, are now also all things from and through and to Him as the living God, Who in His fellowship with His people according to His counsel shows Himself as the living God. In this way faith clings to these words and thus we are preserved from seeing in them building blocks for a “God-concept.”

When we read that from Him and through Him and to Him are all things, we automatically think of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All things are from God the Father, as the Belgic Confession states: *The Father is the cause, origin, and beginning of all things visible and invisible*, Art.8. Moreover, all things are through the Son, for *through Him all things were made* (John 1:3), and *He, the exact representation of His being, sustains all things by His powerful Word* (Hebr.1:3). Through the Holy Spirit all things are directed toward God – are focused on God; He is the Spirit, the breath Who goes out from the Father and the Son to this world and focuses it on God. One must consider however that in all of this we have to do with what God intended for all created things according to His eternal counsel, and thus not what God eternally is like in Himself, even though this is behind it.

According to His eternal decree, at the creation of the world all things come from God as Father. He willed that all things came from Him; that was a decree of God in His eternal counsel, and thus we read: *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being* (Rev.4:11). In that fixed purpose He willed to be Father to His human beings and receive them as His children. With this intent He created them in His image. We think then of that decree of the Triune God that preceded the creation of the world, according to which the eternal Father desired to designate Himself as Father of His human creatures.

All emphasis must fall on the revelation that all of this was *according to the plan of Him Who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will* (Eph.1:11). Thus, that God is the Father of His human creatures does not derive directly from the fact that He is the eternal Father of the Son. Aside from the fall into sin, it was a deed of God’s condescending love that He desired to be Father to people who are in themselves as dust and ashes. For truly, there exists an ineffaceable boundary between His being Father to His Son and His fatherhood with respect to humans, although there is a connection.

This will of God to be a Father to His human creatures directed their creation and that of the entire world: *Yet for us there is but one God, the Father from Whom all things came and for Whom we live* (1 Cor.8:6). Nevertheless, the creation of all things by God does not mean that all things arbitrarily flow from Him. Calling into being or creating is something different than flowing from or emanating. According to His will and in harmony with His decree God brought forth all things from His mind and by His power. In fact, from the thoughts and abilities of His Father-love He has called all things into being.

We understand that a father desires to have honor and respect from the children he has produced, and thus it is not unusual to hear of God’s Father-love in Malachi 1:6, *A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a Father, where is the honor due Me? If I am a Master, where is the respect due Me?* To be sure, there is love with the Father, for in love He has brought forth all things, but He also maintains the rightful claim of His love and waits for the responding

love that man as head of all creation must give. It is in this way that we confess God as Father in relation to all He created by His Word, and thus faith can grasp it, for in this way He is for us the living God.

However, this immediately calls for God's further revelation in the Son, also in relation to the creation of the world. For although God brought forth the world in His Father-love and demanded that they honor Him as Father, His love in the Son also remained near in the hour of creation. In the Son God's love that gives itself was present in all things from the moment they came into being. For that reason in God's eternal decree the implementation of the creation was entrusted to the Son. The hands of His love have fashioned all things, and while He made them He imprinted the hallmark of God's love on them. With that He gave man in particular the natural propensity for the fellowship of God's love, to receive it and to answer it with a responding, reciprocating love. Moreover all creation also reflected God's love to man, a love which daily sought to give itself to him in all things. With this the Son created harmony and fellowship in this world, and imparted to all created things and to the man a natural orientation toward each other binding them together.

We need to say with emphasis that also in conferring on all things the signature of God's love by means of the Son took place according to God's eternal counsel. What God is prepared to be for all creation in the Son is something different than what the Son eternally is in God, even though there is a connection. According to the eternal counsel of God's will the Son is the One Who carried out the work of creating.

In connection with the activity of creation Scripture designates the Son with special names: the Wisdom, the Word, and the Image of God. In Proverbs 8 He is the **Wisdom** when God brought forth the world, *Who was filled with delight day after day ... rejoicing in His whole world and delighting in mankind* (Prov.8:30,31). John calls Him the **Word** in the first chapter of his gospel, and says that *in Him [the Word] was life and that life was the light of men. Through Him [the Word] all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:4 and 3). In Hebrews 1:3 is stated that *the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful Word*. The names Wisdom, Word, and Image of God are related to what the Son is for this world. They do not convey what He eternally is in God, but how in God's counsel concerning the creation of the world He is revealed and appeared. He would reveal the Wisdom of God's love in this world and in Him God expressed all the love that would ever be proclaimed here, for He would show the world the Image of God's love.

Thus all things exist through the Son. It appears that there is an unnecessary repetition in the second part of 1 Corinthians 8: 6, *and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through Whom all things came and through Whom we live*. Yet that second "through" is not superfluous, for all things are made by the hands of His love, and what we in responsive love can be for God, we are able to be and do only through Him. And in this way faith grasps this revelation of Scripture. The world and we came from the Father, and it is the Father Who has demanded from us that we honor Him in love. Also, the Son has made and designed us for God's fellowship and daily seeks to impress God's love upon our hearts. Thus through Him we have fellowship with the Father.

If in fact the world and we with it came *from* God, then the world and especially we in it must be *to* God, which is, directed toward Him. It is clear that "to God" is dependent on "from God." However, if we only knew of a creation of the world "through God," then the demand that we must be "to God" would not come to us so undeniably. We know that God maintains Himself and His honor in what has come from Him. It is the Holy Spirit Who orients the world and us in it toward God. He protects and defends God's holiness and with that holiness He maintains Himself in the works of His hands. In this way God makes the world and us as part of it holy to the Lord. Everything God has imparted to the world in creation must be directed toward Him and focused on Him. Therefore it is also necessary that everything yet hidden in it must be brought to discovery and development. It is for this purpose that the Holy Spirit is involved in leading the world and human life in the development of all gifts and talents in order that in this way the fullness of the world should give honor to God.

Thus again we speak of what the Holy Spirit is in relation to this world and not about what He eternally is in God, although there is some connection. Once more we see how the Holy Spirit was involved in God's decree concerning the creation of the world. We take note of the fact that Scripture does not refer to Him with special names, and yet in this connection the Name "Holy Spirit" is meaningful. For He is the One Who makes this world and us as part of it holy to God, and thus He gives the world and us the Spirit or breath of God, directing our life toward Him. It is in this way that

faith understands this revelation of God's Word. The Spirit of God's love seeks to direct our life to God's love and for this leads our life and brings it to development.

### ***The Triune God and the Redemption and Sanctification of the World***

What we have been discussing is what was and is the relationship of the Triune God to the world in its creation and preservation. We worked this out for the Son, for the Holy Spirit, and for the Father. The catechism does provide the division of the Apostles Creed: of the Father and our creation, of the Son and our redemption, of the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. Yet, the impression must not be created that in each instance the work of the one Person is loosely placed next to that of the other Persons. Creation is the work of the Triune God as much as redemption and sanctification. However, when redemption and sanctification would be joined together as the work of recreation, and viewed as the work of the Son and the Spirit of the Son, while detaching it from creation which is then seen as the work of the Father, Scripture would have been violated.

All dualism between recreation and creation, that is, every thought that views re-creation as God bringing forth something totally different than what He did at creation, must be completely rejected. Through His recreating work God did and does nothing other than restoring and bringing to completion what through the creation of the world He had produced. This dualism between creation and recreation must be dismissed because it is against the Scriptures: God has once more in love turned toward this world and was willing to love it in such a way as to give His only begotten Son for it. Such dualism must however also be turned away because it can easily give rise to the idea that there is a dualism in God Himself. For then the god who would be creator of the world, as the god of power and justice would be different than the god of love who shows himself in redemption.

There is no dualism in God – no dualism between justice and love, no dualism between creation and recreation – but the creation proceeds from the Triune God, even as recreation is from Him. Therefore this first needed to be demonstrated about the creation from God's Word. Thus we needed to point out that we cannot speak of God the Father in connection with everything created unless we immediately then also involve with it the work of the Son and that of the Holy Spirit. The same thing however must now also be demonstrated with respect to redemption and sanctification.

With redemption is meant here the work especially carried out by Christ: His preaching of the Word of redemption as Prophet, the atonement by Him as Priest as He completed this on earth and now fulfills it in heaven, and the redeeming rule of Him as King. Of that work of redemption as well, Scripture reveals that it is not only that of Christ but of the Triune God. Thus we encounter the work of the three Persons as this has been determined in the eternal counsel of redemption, and also those three Persons Themselves in their relationship to the world according to the same counsel of redemption.

Deliverance or redemption comes from the Father. He has willed the atonement of the world in order that the just claim of His love would prevail in the response to His love that He received from the redeemed and in them from the world. When in the decree of election and reprobation not all would come to salvation, He maintains also His judgment over those who are lost – the justice of His love. In their hardening of heart He makes plain their responsibility to Him, the responsibility with which He created them. Redemption proceeded from the Father's love that had turned once more toward the world; and thus He gave His only begotten Son over to death, also raised Him from the dead, and glorified Him crowning Him as King. When we say that He gave His only begotten Son, it means and entails that also the incarnation of the Word went out from Him. The fact that God sought the world and mankind went out from the Father's love. Thus Christ could tell the parable of the father who was looking for his lost son.

In all of this, faith knows the Father's love. That love in essence however is the same as that with which He once created this world and positioned it in a relationship of love to Him. We may never forget that this was the same love, even though we know that in redemption it is revealed with much greater intensity. Yet also this love for and in redemption exists by virtue of God's eternal decree: what God in His counsel is for the world as Father is something different than what the Father is eternally within God, even though there is a relationship. It has pleased God to become Father to this world again, in that He once more took people to Himself as His children.

Redemption is through the Son, the eternal Word, which for this purpose became flesh. He Who determined the natural disposition of man, Who imprinted all created things with the hallmark of God's love, Who placed God's love in man's heart, Who effected the harmony and fellowship in this world through His love – He was also the One Who wished to reconcile this world and mankind with God. Moreover, He was the One Who wished to gather His Church as the new humanity, wanting to restore harmony in a disparate world. For this purpose He emerged as Savior of the world in the eternal counsel of redemption.

This work of the Son in the redemption of the world is thus in accord with what He did at creation. Also in this work of redemption He has revealed Himself as the Wisdom, the Word, and the Image of God. God's wisdom becomes evident in Him in the restoring love; He is again as the eternal Word the life and light of men; in Him we see as in a reflected image God's eternal love. What the Son is in our redemption remains distinct from what He is eternally in God, even if there is a relation.

Through the Holy Spirit Christ has finished the work of deliverance and now He continues to labor for our redemption. Christ as man was conceived by the Holy Spirit; He was anointed with the Spirit Who guided His human life and made it prosper. We read that He *through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God* (Hebr.9:14), and that He was *made alive by the Spirit* (1 Peter 3:18) and in that Spirit ascended into heaven. Thus Christ has done nothing for our redemption except through the Holy Spirit Who made the life of Christ holy unto God, and Who also sanctified it to God as an atoning sacrifice, and Who now has glorified Christ in heaven and fulfills Him. The Holy Spirit did this with Christ as Head of the world, so that *by Him and for Him* (Col.1:16) He again would render this world holy.

This work of the Holy Spirit is in agreement with what He did at the creation of the world. Through sin the world had turned away from God, but the Holy Spirit directed it again to Him. That is the great work of sanctification, and by way of cleansing or sanctifying He leads the world and mankind to development and enables all that is hidden to come to light. Also in this work He is shown to be the "Holy Spirit" Who maintains God's holiness in the world by turning God's elect to Him again, while He hardens the others in their aversion and unbelief as judgment. He also goes out to the world and mankind as the sanctifying breath of God. Yet what the Spirit does in this way for the consecration of the world is something different than what He eternally is in God, even though there is a relation.

We do not need to address the work of sanctification separately now because it was already discussed as part of redemption, where it was spoken of as a special work of the Holy Spirit. Not a single work, however, is carried out by just one of the three Persons alone; and this is also true of sanctification as can be demonstrated from God's Word. For the Holy Spirit is sent for this work by Christ from the Father. And when it involves the most intimate activity in sanctification, God's dwelling in our hearts, we think in the first place of the Holy Spirit. Thus Christ says concerning this: *If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him* (John 14:23). Also in this work of sanctification the Triune God is clearly revealed.

In all those acts of creation, redemption, and sanctification we need to acknowledge the Triune God. Each of those acts is illuminated and explained to us by the Scriptures as that of the Triune God. Faith makes us not merely focus on those works, but also enables us to see God in them. The Scriptures tell us that a fool does not know what he sees; and that applies especially to God's three-fold work. It is possible that we approach all of created reality with eyes closed, that is in a spiritual sense so that we do see the various things, but we do not see God in them. It is by believing God's Word as it casts light on matters that all at once this created world becomes different, and now we see in it God's love from which, through which, and unto which are all things. It is possible also to view the redemption in Christ with spiritually closed eyes, and then we are willing to see and to have the blessings of Christ, but we do not see Him in them and are thus not able to appropriate them for ourselves. Also, it is possible for us that we are willing to strive for sanctification and yet not do this by faith, through which we come to know that sanctification as the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in all those works God must become known to us by faith.

Moreover, in all those works God must also become known to us as the Triune God, and we need to learn to distinguish in them the work of the three Persons. It is our intention to devote the last section of this Lord's Day to that subject. However, the next section needs to deal with how according to God's Word the three Persons eternally exist in God.

Finally, we need to make yet one comment about what has been explained in this fourth section. It cannot be emphasized enough that every one of these three works is an activity of the Triune God in order that specifically recreation should never be separated from creation. Of course we observe that every time in our minds with each work a different Person of the Trinity stands out. Thus, with the creation we think mainly of Him from Whom derives all beginning, while with redemption we particularly focus on Him through Whom all communion or fellowship exists, and with sanctification we concentrate on Him Who directs life toward God. Very naturally then, the confession of the church was arranged according to the three Persons and the division came to be: *about God the Father and our creation; about God the Son and our redemption; about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification.*

### ***The Three Persons in God***

Behind what the three Persons mean for the world is the revelation of what they are eternally in God. The Scriptures reveal something of that to us, not for the purpose that we should attempt to go further than what God's Word tells us, but that we should know that in the dealings of the three Persons to us there is nothing arbitrary but that instead these have an eternal background. Precisely that should generate adoration, and without adoration and worship faith is impossible. It is when we encounter adoration within us that our faith is strong.

In fact there is actually not only a revelational Trinity but also an ontological Trinity. For there are not merely three ways in which God reveals Himself and relates to us, but there is an eternal distinction within God apart from His relation with His creatures. We would not be able to know anything about that however if the Scriptures had not revealed it to us, and if this did not have its own significance for the relationship of the three Persons to us.

Thus the church learned to speak of the three "Persons," and confesses that God is one in Being and exists in three Persons. On the basis of various texts, among them John 1:1, *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*, the church began to use the designation "Persons." Even though *the Word* is a name for the Son of God in His association with this world, nevertheless from this usage it appears that He did not have a beginning but existed from eternity. Of this Word it is said factually and literally that He was *with (pros* in the original Greek) God. Thus He was in conscious relation to God or with God. Also with respect to the Spirit Scripture reveals to us that He *searches all things, even the deep things of God* (1 Cor.2:10). On the basis of these kinds of texts the church arrived at the confession of the three distinct Persons in God.

It may seem strange to us that the Church of the Old Testament did not know this and that only with the New Testament revelation she reached the clarity to confess it. Concerning this, the Apostle Paul indicates that during the Old Testament period the Church was still in its infancy, and that for a child's mind many things must remain in the shadows, waiting to be discerned when maturity comes. With the distinction of the three eternal Persons in God much has become clear in His revelation, matters for which the Old Testament Church could only grope. Even the Pharisees could not answer Christ's question how David could call the Messiah His Lord, while being his Son. And at that time people could not fully understand the statement, *The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet'* (Psalm 110:1). Neither could they understand then that God as Father is a different Person for us than the Son or the Holy Spirit.

When it became clear that not only God's three revelational modes needed to be considered, but also the nature of the Trinity, the question was raised how we should see the relationship between the three Persons. In this pursuit the names of the three Persons revealed much. Thus, through the names of the Father and the Son the Church arrived at the confession that the Son is generated eternally by the Father; while the name of the Holy Spirit brought the Church to the acknowledgement that the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son.

The Greek Orthodox Church maintained the confession that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father. By its very nature this contained the notion that the Father on the one hand is the Son, while on the other He is the Holy Spirit. In this view there is still a remnant of the idea of subordination, which is the suggestion that of the three Persons, the Father is the highest and that the Son and the Holy Spirit are less or inferior to the Father. It is not surprising that this understanding had immense consequences in the Church. For fellowship with the Father was thus considered possible in

one way through the Son without the Holy Spirit, but it was also possible through the Holy Spirit without the Son. There was therefore a way to us from the Father through the Son, but also from the Father through the Holy Spirit.

The implication is clear that if fellowship or communion with the Father is possible through the Son without the Holy Spirit, such a fellowship is without faith for it is the Holy Spirit Who works faith in us. This fellowship without faith therefore comes to us through ecclesiastical ceremonies, and particularly through the sacraments by which the life that is in the Son is imparted. This was bound to develop into a dead church orthodoxy.

However, if fellowship with the Father is possible through the Holy Spirit without the Son, it must mean a fellowship without atonement – without seeing a distance between God and a responsibility toward Him. This is logically bound to end up in mysticism. Formalism and mysticism have indeed plagued church life in the Greek Orthodox Church. It is true of course that these two are always and everywhere enemies of a healthy spiritual life, also of the Church of the West; but the Greek Orthodox Church could not offer adequate resistance to this because of its confession.

The Church in the West rejected this entire view with its consequences, and based herself on those statements of Scripture in which the Spirit is also called the Spirit of the Son. There are some Scriptural expressions it is true, that reveal a relationship between the Spirit and the Son as our Redeemer, but the Church has understood here that behind this relationship between the Son and the Spirit in their connection to the world must be the eternal relationship between Them both. Consistently rejecting the doctrine of subordination, the Western Church confessed that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son.

The generation of the Son as well as the proceeding of the Holy Spirit indicates an eternal activity in God, one that never began and is never concluded. The Father presents and reflects Himself eternally in the Son and sees Himself eternally in the Son. There is thus no remoteness between the Father and the Son but eternal communion and fellowship, for the Father in love eternally knows the Son through the Spirit, even as conversely the Son in love knows the Father through the Spirit. Since the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son, also apart from this world, it must be a procession from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father. It was in this way that the Church used the picture of the triangle: from the Father as the first side, the Son as the second, while they meet each other at different ends at the third side. It was in this way that God's self-sufficiency and blessed perfection were both depicted in that illustration.

Through this revelation of God's Word concerning the three Persons in God the Church understood better than during the Old Testament that God is one, and that yet at the same time there was a living incentive of love in Him. There is no rigid inactivity within God in the sense that He is the mover of all things yet He Himself remains immobile, for He is greatly moved by all that happens in this world. Nevertheless it is not a passion that overpowers God, for it finds its origin in the eternal impetus of love that exists in Him. Thus Scripture at times uses the strongest language about God's emotions for this world: it can say that God is apprehensive in our anxiety; it can speak about the rumble of God's bowels as a sign of His overwhelming mercy; it can admit that God changes and relents. Yet we observe that God is not dependent on this world and is not taken along in its happenings, because all of His emotions originate out of the inner determination of His love that is in Him.

When we by faith think of the Father we realize that there is a fountain of love within God, which is not supplied from anything outside of Him but eternally wells up within God as Father. How can God's love for us be new every morning? Why could He after the fall into sin give us without reservation His love again? How could it be that He would give Himself in Christ to people who of themselves had nothing to give? Because there is in Him an eternal, original, and inexhaustible stream of love and in this God is the Self-sufficient and Most Blessed One.

How could God summon us in our liability and accountability before Him and yet at the same time provide the response that we in love should have given? He could do that because He is not only Father, but also Son and because He as the Son had inclined us toward His love and redeemed us in His love. In the Son as the eternal Word God has expressed everything that He ever intended to do and be for mankind and the world. Behind this is the eternal generation by which the Father sees Himself reflected in the Son.

In the Holy Spirit God continually comes to this world and to His children. Behind this is found however the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. In the Spirit the Father is eternally focused in love on the Son and the Son toward the Father; thus God directs this world in the saved mankind toward Himself through the Holy Spirit.

### ***The Triune God and We***

We confess that the Holy Trinity is a mystery that is recognized by us in adoration but that can never be explained. There is no image or likeness that could ever explain to us God's Triune nature. Of course, some images might tell us something, and perhaps especially the images that are taken from our own life, since we were made after the image of the Triune God.

In all of this we need to be very careful with all images. Images are somewhat like a nation's flag with three banners, or even like that of a family wherein we recognize father, mother, and children, mean nothing because God does not consist "of" three Persons, but "in" three Persons. Also the illustration of a tree with roots, trunk, and foliage does not really help to clarify the eternal relationship of the three Persons to each other. Thus we continue to confess the mystery, accepting that all images and illustrations only marginally and minimally contribute insight into the Trinity.

Nevertheless, there is a knowing of God in His Triune existence, when we proceed from how God relates to us in the three Persons. We remember in this connection again the first sentence of Art.9 of the Belgic Confession: *All this we know both from the testimonies of Holy Scripture and from the respective works of the three Persons, and especially those we perceive in ourselves.* Thus there really is only a practical faith-knowledge of the divine Trinity.

However, this knowledge is necessary. For if the Church should understand this revelation of Scripture improperly or neglect it, and if she would be willing to recognize only one of the Persons at the expense of the Others, the Church would err in all respects. It has been properly stated that every error in the Church when fully considered, can be reduced to an incongruity with the confession of the Trinity. In fact we have already noted some of these deviations in our discussion.

Now, if the Church should consider only the Father while neglecting the Son and the Holy Spirit, she would lapse into Unitarianism, and would lose sight of the eternal stream of love that is in God. Moreover, she would no longer be able to see God as He has given Himself to us in the Son, and would descend into fatal legalism and formalism. On the other hand, if the Church would recognize only the Son and the Spirit of the Son at the expense of the revelation of the Father, she would lose sight of the distance between God and us and no longer would be able to see her responsibility over against God. Also, she would no longer be willing to believe the atonement of the blood of the cross, and would seek her salvation in a mystical union with God.

It is also possible that the Church would be prepared to recognize the functioning of the Spirit only at the expense of the revelation of the Father and the Son. Then she would no longer be able to accept the law that the Father has determined for us, and which the Son has fulfilled on our behalf and has again established as a blessed rule in His Kingdom. She would begin to be enthusiastic instead about a third dispensation, meaning one of the Holy Spirit after the one of the Father and that of the Son – a third dispensation in which the law is mastered, and in which she would descend into a lawless spiritualism. What we have done here is to provide a few significant possibilities; it would be possible to adduce many more variations.

There is also the possibility that the Church, because of the Trinity in God, would lose sight of His oneness and would be prepared to believe conflicting contradictions within God, such as that between justice and love, and between power and grace. We need to mention especially about these contradictions that the Church as a whole has not nearly overcome all of them. In fact, she would not be able to see the recreation as restoration and completion of the work of the creation, and might want to place a dualism between the Kingdom of God and the original created world. In this connection we need to underline what the catechism says, namely that the three distinct Persons *are the one, true, eternal God.* Thus we must reject every kind of dualism within God.

After having spoken about the revelation of the Trinity of God and the Church, we need to observe something concerning our personal knowledge of the Triune God. We think especially of those who were born into the family setting of God's covenant and whose hearts from early youth were opened by the Spirit to receive the gospel.

They start life with the knowledge of God as Father, Whose love appears in their lives and Who leads them and in Whose love they also acknowledge their responsibility. Along with this they also know of Jesus Christ Who gave His life as a ransom for their sins, Whose life on earth and Whose dying on the cross they follow in their thoughts with love. Further than this these children often do not go, for this takes place in their developing life. For them a transition of great importance takes place, often not before their twentieth year, when they begin to see in Jesus the true divine love that in Him as a man assumed our guilt and effected reconciliation. They have known of Jesus, and they also knew that Jesus was God's Son, but at the most they perceived in it the love of the Father Who gave His Son for us, but they have not yet found the fullness of God's love in Jesus because they have not yet reached that stage of life where they can comprehend the knowledge of the Trinity. It is an experience of great significance when the one single ray of God's love breaks through for them, and they discern the richness of the Son's love in distinction from that of the Father.

However, at the same time something else happened. We are all born individualists. As children they have accepted that their sins have been atoned for through the blood of Christ, but in their individualistic thinking they developed trouble with that as they grew up: how can Jesus Christ as another person take my place? It takes considerable effort before that individualism is overcome and they begin to see Christ as the Head of the fellowship in the covenant. They approach this then from two sides: on the one hand, individualism does not satisfy them any longer and they must reach out for the fellowship of the covenant and for Christ as Head of that communion. On the other hand, this helps them when in Christ they recognize the full measure of God's love, and that as the expression of God's love He can appear as our Head and atone for our debt because he became man.

One speaks with many people who are much older than twenty and who still have not developed this insight. Now it is true that for various reasons the enrichment of faith is inhibited, and the complaint is often heard that a person has not come to the cross of Christ for atonement. The problem may have developed that atonement by His blood has not been considered a necessity and a requirement; and related to this a lack of a consciousness of guilt. The cause for this is not always easy to determine, but one contributing factor however is that God's covenant which He established in His love and in which He asserts the just claim of His love, has not become a reality for many people. When we come under the obligation of God's covenant, we see the necessity of reconciliation, and we begin to struggle with the revelation of God in Christ.

For many, however, the covenant of God is but a concept or a sound – whether pleasant or unpleasant. It is true that there is also a discovery involved, or rather many discoveries, as God's covenant becomes a reality for us. For then we see Christ not only as the fullness of God's love, but also as the Head of the fellowship as well as the atonement of our sins. It is then in the covenant that we begin to understand something of God's Triune nature; for only in the covenant and thus as the God of the covenant can He reveal Himself to us as the Triune God.

In the lives of those whose hearts the Holy Spirit opened for the gospel from the beginning there is also a striving to be sanctified. However, for many these attempts have brought disappointment and at times despair. For sometimes in such struggles we long for the help of the Holy Spirit, but there are also attempts when we are forced to admit that in our lives we are not able to be holy. Frequently in those circumstances it is not properly understood how sanctification actually takes place. And this can continue long after the twentieth year.

We have discerned the correct origin of sanctification only when we know that the Holy Spirit is poured out in our hearts and with Him the love of God. And then we do not merely wish the help of the Holy Spirit, for as long as one only wants the help of the Spirit one is not yet aware of Him as a true Person and as the love of God dwelling in our hearts. But when we are sanctified by that love of God, we ourselves also actively want to be sanctified seeking to respond in a love that is dependent on the love of the Spirit every single moment. It is in this way that the Holy Spirit becomes known to us as a Person in God. And to be sure, this is a discovery that takes place when we in faith acknowledge God's covenant. For God promised the outpouring of the Spirit of His love in His covenant, and in faithfulness to His covenant has fulfilled that promise. Again, here also it is evident that in His covenant God is known as the Triune God.

In this development of faith not everything takes place in a straight line, and there are many difficulties and dangers. Specifically we need to deal with and overcome every conflict and every dualism that we could possibly see in God. However, there may well be times in which we see a certain contrast between the love of Christ that ever remains with us and the Father's relationship with us. And why is it that frequently the sanctifying Spirit seems so far from us, and yet we know that we believe in the atoning love of Christ?

That question can confuse us, until we come to the realization that even as it is only through faith that we find peace in Christ's atonement, so also we come to understand the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts only by faith. Through that same faith we discover also the Father as our Father. Thus it is that in the pathway of faith that we must conquer many difficulties, among them that we tend to see a certain dualism in God. And in doing so we fully attain to confessing the unity in the Trinity, and with a believing heart that knows God through His fellowship with us, we can echo the catechism when it says *that these three distinct Persons are the one, true, eternal God.*

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 9****26. What do you believe when you say: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?"**

*That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who out of nothing created heaven and earth and all that is in them, and Who still upholds and governs them by His eternal counsel and providence is for the sake of Christ His Son, my God, and my Father.*

*In Him I trust so completely as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul, and will also turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this life of sorrow.*

*He is able to do so as almighty God, and willing also as a faithful Father.*

***The Eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ***

The answer of this Lord's Day is one continuous sentence. We should be able to treat it therefore also as one single sentence, which of course is impossible. Nevertheless, every thought and idea in it is dependent on all the others, and therefore we must not lose sight of the context and coherence even for a moment. That God is the Creator of heaven and earth is connected to His being my God and Father, while the reverse is also true. And that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is again related to and connected with both facts mentioned.

In any case, we may never say that what is confessed here is a three-fold Fatherhood of God: His Fatherhood with respect to the eternal Son, with respect to heaven and earth, and also with respect to His children. And thus there would be three Fatherhoods, between which we must look for the relationship. That however is not at all how matters relate to each other in this Lord's Day. Moreover, should the confession be considered from that perspective, the consequence surely would be that the church would show little interest in the first and the second relationships, because apart from God's Fatherhood of His children these cannot really be understood. The result would be that the third view would receive all the interest, and this is never satisfactory since also this third link of God's Fatherhood cannot be understood apart from the first two.

We should never think here of three concepts next to each other. Rather, there is a central point from which the other views proceed. That nucleus is in the words *the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. That God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ controls and dominates the fact of the creation of heaven and earth, as well as the reality that He is my God and Father. These last two factors are also mutually related to each other.

The confession that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ conveys something different than that He is the Father of the eternal Son. For when we confess God's eternal Fatherhood with respect to the eternal Son we think of eternal generation. However, that is not intended with the words *the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Of course, that does not mean that the eternal generation is not assumed and included here. In fact, behind every relationship between the Father and the Son we must perceive that generation. Nevertheless, as the main point something different is meant here. That is evident from the answer since it does not speak of "the Son", but of *our Lord Jesus Christ*. Thus the focus here is on the relationship of the Father to the incarnate Word, to our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is our Mediator and Head in the covenant. And that relationship between the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ is seen here as controlling the relationship of God as Creator with respect to heaven and earth and also the relationship of God with respect to His own. Thus it is with emphasis that the catechism confesses that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has created heaven and earth, and similarly it highlights that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is my God and my Father.

The first part, that God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is designated as Creator of heaven and earth does not need to cause any surprise. The question that could be raised is whether at the creation of heaven and earth there was already

consideration of the Word becoming flesh. After all, this incarnation really has no significance for the creation of the world, but only for the redemption of the world fallen into sin. How can it be therefore that God as Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can be called the Creator of heaven and earth?

In order to answer that question we must return to the idea that the love God has given us in Christ Jesus, is in essence no other than that which He expressed in the eternal Word. That love, which He wished to grant men in the eternal Word was the most important *motif* in the creation of heaven and earth, for in that love to which men were to respond in love God would glorify Himself to the greatest extent. That love of God expressed in the eternal Word to man in the covenant of His favor, was the central idea and main theme in the creation of heaven and earth. After the fall into sin He once more turned in love to what He had created; but now however it was a love in the incarnate Word, and that love was demonstrated in Him as the Mediator and Head in the covenant of grace. Because God in that way directed Himself in Jesus Christ to the world, the existence of that world was maintained and saved. Therefore we read in Colossians that all things exist through Him that is through the Lord Jesus Christ: *all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together* (Col.1:16, 17).

Because God's love that we received in Jesus Christ is in essence the same as that granted to us in the eternal Word, God as Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can also be called the Creator of heaven and earth. That is also what we read in the Gospel of John of the eternal Word: *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us* (John 1:14), and also, that *through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:3). In Proverbs 8 we read about the Wisdom Which is now the wisdom of God's gracious love for us, that *when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was the craftsman at His side...rejoicing in His whole world and delighting in mankind* (Prov.8: 29-31).

It is in this way that all things in this answer of the catechism must be seen as related to each other. When we consider the creation of heaven and earth and their preservation by God's eternal counsel and providence, then at the heart of this must be seen the love that is demonstrated to us now by God in Jesus Christ. From this it is evident that we cannot speak of the creation of heaven and earth unless we involve in it the last part of the answer, namely that God *for the sake of Christ His Son is my God and my Father*, since God's love in Christ for His own has the pivotal place in the present existence of the world.

It is evident therefore that this first article of the Apostles Creed cannot be discussed unless there is involved in it what is confessed in the subsequent articles about Jesus Christ. The catechism involves that immediately when it begins by saying: *the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Neither can what is confessed about the Holy Spirit in the last articles be left out of consideration. Also the three components of the Apostles Creed: *about God the Father and our creation, about God the Son and our redemption, and about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification*, are not simply placed next to each other, but are mutually and internally most closely related.

That means that we do not have the proper perspective of creation except from the recreation as this has now has been begun by God in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit of Christ. The creation of the world is now approached from the point of view of its redemption and sanctification. In fact, we cannot really read Genesis 1 except by faith in Jesus Christ the Redeemer of the world that once was created. We are reminded that the love of God in the eternal Word was central in the creation of the world, and we know that love now in no other way than in Jesus Christ.

When we say that the creation of the world cannot be approached in any other way than from its recreation, it does not mean that in the recreation something was provided through which the original creation of the world would be considered as having a lesser significance, which was overcome and put aside. For this would posit a certain dualism between creation and the recreation. Every dualism between those two is fully surmounted by maintaining that the love given us now in Jesus Christ is in its essential nature the same as that which once was granted to mankind in the eternal Word. The recreation really means nothing other than the restoration and the completion of the work of the creation.

Thus we see that the dominating idea of this answer is expressed in the words: *the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. In this context it remains yet to place the emphasis on the word *eternal*. That is, from eternity God has appointed the Son as the eternal Word. There is an eternal love of God for His children in the Word, and with that eternal love we focus on His love in the eternal Word for His original humanity, as well as on His love in the incarnate Word for the redeemed humanity. Creation and recreation are most closely connected and related in God's eternal counsel.

From this central focus of the answer: *the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, two lines are drawn. The one confesses that this God is the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, while the other states that He is my God and my Father. Because those two thoughts are connected to one single concept, they must also cohere mutually and internally. No one can understand nor fully grasp that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth except the person who by faith has learned to confess Him as his God and Father. Undoubtedly the Gentiles know something of the relationship between God and this world, or at least they have some notion of the dependence of all creatures. Yet that is something totally different than the confession that the whole world is from, through, and to that love, which now is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The Gentiles cannot understand this meaning of all created things, and do not have this confession as expressed in the catechism. On the other hand, we cannot confess that God is our God and Father except we confess that as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ He is the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth. We can only understand the meaning of our life in relation to the sense of all that is created.

### ***The Creation of the World***

In Hebrews 11:3 we read: *By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.* These words are written in the chapter in which we also read about faith for which the ancients were commended and through which they were saved. We may not take this third verse out of its context in this entire chapter and believe that in this verse something different is meant with faith than in the rest of the chapter. By faith through which we are saved, we understand that the world was formed by the Word of God. *By the Word of God* (NKJ) must then mean: through the Word of His love – the love we come to know by faith.

We need then not yet think of the eternal Word in the sense of John 1, but rather of the fact that God created by speaking, and that He *calls things that are not as though they were* (Rom.4:17). However, what is presupposed here is that the Word by which He called all things into being was the Word of His love for His people, for it is that love of which we become conscious only by faith. This factor therefore also forms the background to the concept that God's love for man was pivotal in the creation of the world. Here then is further proof for what we said earlier, namely that we cannot confess that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Creator of heaven and earth, unless we also confess that He is our God and our Father.

In this connection we need to pursue somewhat further what Scripture says about the knowledge of the Gentiles. We read in Romans 1:20: *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- His eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.* We should not forget that literally it states, "being understood, discerned clearly" or "having seen clearly with the mind." When we have cognitive knowledge of it, or when we by believing God's Word understand it, we see it clearly. That this is the meaning is clear from what follows, where we read that *their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened* (Rom. 1:21). By rejecting God's Word, that is, by breaking the covenant of God, they lost the ability to understand. They no longer clearly see in this created world even the comprehensive: *His eternal power and divine nature.* And whatever they still see of this continues to be a perpetual accusation against them because they have rejected God's Word.

The same subject is treated in Acts 14:16,17: *In the past, He let all nations go their own way. Yet He has not left Himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.* It was in Athens that Paul makes use of the inscription on an altar "To an Unknown God" in order to say to the Gentiles that the true God has become unknown to them. He has through their own fault and by their rejection of His Word of covenant become unknown to them; however He has overlooked their times of guilty ignorance, and once again has Himself preached as He is in Jesus Christ. Thus, while the Gentiles do have certain impressions of God, they do not understand that the world was formed by the Word of God because it is the Word of His love, and that Word is known only by a true faith. In fact, they also do not understand the essence of what is invisible and from which was made what is seen; for those invisible things – His eternal power and divinity – are for a true faith the eternal power and divinity of the Word of His love.

All emphasis therefore must fall on the fact that we ***by faith*** understand that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth. That faith is thus the faith by which we are saved, by which we are with God,

by which there is no opposition or conflict between God and us, by which we offer no objections against God, by which we are in agreement with Him, trust in Him, and rest in Him. How else could we possibly, except by this faith, confess what the catechism here confesses? And when for a moment we view the world in all its misery, how can we then confess that it is from, through, and to God's love given us in Christ?

It is improper and erroneous to speak of the absurdity or the meaninglessness of faith. Such designations would presume that the world and our hearts were totally and completely alienated from God's love, and abandoned. Yet the world has been retained and kept by the love of God in Christ, and He does change our heart so that it again seeks and responds to His love. And thus by faith we do not reach for a void. Of course it is true that faith frequently needs to oppose the appearance of things that often comes with the matters we cannot see, and cling to Him Who is invisible. That is the message of all of Hebrews 11. From this perspective we need first to focus on the essentials of this part of the answer about the creation of the world.

We confess here that God created the heaven and the earth *out of nothing*. That does not mean that something came from nothing, for that is impossible. The world came from God. Scripture states that in several places, for example in Romans 11:36, *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever!* Also in 1 Corinthians 8:6, *yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from Whom all things came and for Whom we live.* We must always observe carefully here that the world did not come from God's Being, and did not emanate or flow from Him, for then the world itself would belong to the Divine Being and be part of it, and thus it would be divine. The fact is that there is nothing divine in this world, and nothing that we must worship. Instead we must meticulously observe and diligently maintain the boundary between Creator and creature. This world is only a creation brought about by the will of God.

Thus, that *from God* needs to be understood as: from His mind and power. That would be then the mind and power in relation to this world; that is, the mind and power by which He gave His love and anticipated a loving response. Out of this God brought forth the world. That God created heaven and earth *out of nothing* has for us the meaning that He created them out of nothing external to Himself. God brought forth this world out of Himself as the God of love. And since it came from His love and bears the splendor that it came from His love, how could this world then become so corrupt? How was it possible that what came forth from His love could ever come under the sway of sin and of the evil one? And how could it ever be that in this world a principle should come to expression that is not from God's love?

Furthermore, this world is not merely *from*, but also *through* God's love. This idea is seen especially in the confession of the catechism when it states that *the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ .... created heaven and earth.* That is, through the love that He now gives us in Christ, He brought forth the world. Through that love as it was once expressed in the eternal Word *all things were made, and without Him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:3). That love is not only the origin but is also the *motif*, that is, the dominant theme and central idea of all things. In this context we also refer to what appears next in the answer: *Who still upholds and governs them by His eternal counsel and providence.* God's love in the Mediator is also the controlling and governing *motif* in leading the history of the world, when Scripture shows us, *inter alia*, that *the Lamb looking as if it had been slain standing in the center of the throne* (Rev.5:6). That love, with which He gave Himself for us in death, now has authority over all things. Thus Christ says that to Him as the Mediator Who died and was raised all authority in heaven and earth has been given. When we observe the immense suffering of this world, it is a mystery for us how the government of the world is in the hands of the Lamb, and how God's love in the Mediator is the controlling *motif* in it.

Heaven and earth, moreover, have also been created *to* God's love. For us, in seeing the world's misery, it is almost an insuperable difficulty to consider that it finds its purpose in God's love, and that its history must come to an end with the glorification of that love and with the worship and adoration of it by the redeemed creatures. That struggle is made immeasurably more difficult by the confession that the origin and the history of this world happen according to God's eternal counsel, the counsel of His will. Nothing of all this appears to be coincidental; and God is not surprised by the sin and misery, but He has determined all this. Whatever may happen or will take place, all of it was written in His book.

Thus this Article: *I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth* becomes something we can only hold on to with the struggle of faith. We are able to embrace the confession that all of this with its history is from, through, and to God's love, only when each time we come with a victorious faith. There may be times when we do not have too much trouble with that battle; but not nearly always is that peacefulness a fruit of a triumphant faith, for it could

also be the consequence of passing by the needs of the world. But when we accept the present suffering and misery we nevertheless must come to God – and to Him as Father – by a faith that does not argue with Him but submits to Him. And then we come in the full confidence that conquers every resistance of our soul, confessing Him in His love in Christ as Creator of heaven and earth. When we consider this from our side, such a confession is impossible. However, we need to say about this that what is impossible with man is possible with God. He is able to make us confess this by a faith that also sees something of God's love in all things.

The prerequisite for this is that we have seen God's love in the suffering of Christ. He has not kept Himself removed from the sin and misery of this world, but He has in Christ taken all this upon Himself. In His love He has known and recognized this world in its sin and misery, and thus we may now also see the power of that redeeming love in all things. However much the world has been corrupted, and however much it suffers, it has been taken hold of by God for redemption in Jesus Christ; that is, by means of that love from, through, and to which it once was created. Thus it is that through God in Christ much good is still being done. Faith understands this, and by looking at the cross of Christ faith also in this answer gains the victory.

### ***God's Counsel***

We need not say anything about God's providence here, since this will be treated in the next Lord's Day. What is required, however, is that we focus on God's counsel, since it does not appear explicitly anywhere else in the catechism. It should be noted that the counsel of God is mentioned in this Lord's Day after the creation as though applying only to providence, yet it also takes in the work of creation itself. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the catechism mentions God's counsel only in relation to providence. It is well to remind ourselves here that the catechism is not a dogmatic work but an instructional confession, intended and structured for practical use. For that reason it mentions the counsel of God as we first come into contact with it as it leads the history of the world and our own lives, even though its guidance and direction lie behind the actual work of creation. Thus we intend to focus here on God's counsel in practical terms.

We proceed from the understanding that this answer is one unit, with its central pivot in the words *the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. As we have already observed, in Christ the incarnate Word, creation and recreation are connected most closely. Thus what God in the eternal Word sought to be for mankind formed the chief *motif* in the creation of the world; and in that same love, now however in the incarnate Word, God once more directs Himself to this world, so that now *in Him [Christ] all things hold together* (Col.1:17). It is clear therefore that this love occupies the central place in all of God's works: as much in the creation as in the recreation. That means therefore that His love is also central in God's counsel; or to put it differently, in the counsel of God both with respect to creation and with respect to recreation the eternal Word occupies the central place.

When we keep in mind that the love with which God comes to us in the incarnate Word is in essence and nature the same as the love with which He in the beginning gave Himself to the world in the eternal Word, then for us all dualism between the decree of creation and that of redemption is out of the question. On the one hand it must then be said that in the decree about recreation that of the creation is maintained and continued, while on the other hand that in the decree of creation God anticipated the recreation, since the work of God would not be allowed to fail. When we maintain the unity of the love that was first revealed in the eternal Word and after that in the incarnate Word, the entire contention between supra-lapsarianism and infra-lapsarianism loses its meaning, for then a discussion about a two-fold world plan is moot. Thus it is evident from the fact that the view presented here, that it can be said to be an ardent proponent of supra-lapsarianism, while at the same time one could maintain that it persistently pursues infra-lapsarianism.

If then the concept of a two-fold variant world plan must be rejected, we have to deal factually with God's world plan as this is now realizing itself, and as Christ the incarnate Word stands at its very center. For He was central in God's counsel, and *was chosen before the creation of the world* (1 Peter 1:20). In this we do not exclude the work of creation, *for by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth ... He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together* (Col. 1:16, 17). When Scripture speaks in this way about Christ as the centre of God's creation, it goes out from the unity of God's counsel, and every thought of a two-fold world plan is excluded.

Only when we see Christ and the love of God in Him as the pivot of God's counsel, has our faith embraced God's revelation about His counsel, since it is only faith that can grasp God's love. When we do not see Christ as central to it, the revelation of God's counsel can bring us nothing but a fatalistic acquiescence in it. This fatalistic acceptance and passive waiting may be pagan, but it is not Biblical. It is Scriptural however that we by faith receive all things through God's government of world and life, prosperity and adversity, from God's loving hands; and that we may speak of God's hands is the result of that central place of Christ.

A lot of fatalism has been produced by the preaching of God's counsel where the central place of Christ was overlooked or forgotten. When Scripture speaks of God's counsel, it always does so in connection with the covenant of grace or with His election in Christ, for with these are connected the fact that *known to God from eternity are all His works* (Acts 15:18 NKJ) as well as that *He works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will* (Eph.1:11). It is also in this way that Lord's Day 12 refers to *the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption*. In fact, the Bible never speaks in the abstract, but reveals God's counsel as this has Christ as its centre, in order that we may trust in that counsel of God's love, and in accordance with that counsel we may expect all good, even when adversity comes.

Of course, with this nothing has been taken away from the sublimity, the majesty, the sovereignty of God as He reveals this in His eternal counsel. It remains true what Scripture reveals of that counsel of God's love which is now the counsel of His redeeming love: *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen* (Rom.10:33-36). There is always first that adoration of God's sovereignty as this is revealed in the counsel of His love, for without faith there is no worship. We must always first humble ourselves before God if we are able to believe in Him.

However, this does not mean that God's judgment is not determined in that counsel. But also in such judgment Christ is central, for it will be His judgment of the rejected love that is given in Christ. Therefore the judgment has been entrusted to Christ. Thus it is evident that such centralization of Christ in God's counsel has not and does not diminish the glory of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. The Father in Christ wishes to be our Father, from Whom all good things and perfect gifts come to us in Christ. And through the Holy Spirit God implements the counsel of His love in Christ – also in the judgment (John 16:8-11).

The problem of the relation between God's counsel and our responsibility can never be resolved. Nevertheless, some in making God's counsel the action of a distant, remote God when they do not see Christ central to it, have made the revelation concerning that counsel an obstacle for faith. When we see the love of God in Christ as central in God's counsel, we understand more readily that His counsel does not exclude our responsibility, but includes it. Abstract reasoning about a remote God, Who from eternity determined all things, even our deeds, as One Who is a stranger to this life, confuses our thoughts and then we can only see ourselves as a toy of God's caprice. All this becomes entirely different when God – also the determining God – is for us in Christ not a God from far away, but a God Who is nearby.

In this connection God's holy Trinity has something to say to us. We confess that God in His intention as He decrees this in His counsel from eternity was completely free and sovereign. His decree is a deed of His sovereign determination, and He was not coerced nor compelled by anything in that determination. He also could have decided not to make that decree, and could have decided not to bring forth this world and its history. Nothing obligated Him to make this decision. That does not mean, however, that His determination was without meaning, for the intent of this decree was the glorification of His Name, which would attain its greatest realization when men would live in the fellowship of His love.

Because God's counsel has meaning in this way, distinction must be made between origin, manner of implementation, and purpose. Furthermore, we must confess concerning His counsel that it is from God, through God, and to God. For God's counsel is from His love as Father since in that decision the implementation through God's love as the Son is included; and through the love of God as the Holy Spirit all things in that counsel are directed to God. When God's counsel in this way has its origin and starting point in the love of God, and when implemented in human history in the fellowship between God and man, human responsive or reciprocating love will become a reality. And when it has as purpose the glorification of God's Name in that fellowship between God and man, then the responsibility of man must

have been determined in that counsel, for God could only receive that glory of His love from responsible, accountable men.

With this the problem of sin and misery has not been resolved. However, it is possible to say about this that God's counsel fixed the responsibility of man in a way that it did not preclude the possibility of sin. Evidently God's counsel included the reality of sin, but with this, man's responsibility for the fall into sin has not been removed. The point is that when God's counsel includes that responsibility, it cannot be taken away by that same counsel whatever in addition may have been decreed. Furthermore, the fact that sin and the eternal judgment are incorporated in God's counsel is not erased because it is the counsel of God's love. And according to this God would give His love and receive the same in response, thus glorifying Himself in that fellowship. Thus, in that one counsel God decreed not only Adam's fall, but also the restoration in Christ.

Nevertheless, many questions still remain unanswered. We just now addressed Adam's responsibility, which was taken over by Christ. But how does that responsibility work with Adam's descendants? Just imagine if Adam had chosen to be obedient, then all of his descendants would have enjoyed the state of rectitude before God, righteous in their relationship and communion with God, and holy with respect to their nature. Does the fact that Adam's deed was determinative for them all, remove their own responsibility? Even if in that situation there was no possibility of them of sinning, yet they all had to accept Adam's deed as their own and assume their own responsibility they received with their birth.

We are in Christ indeed declared righteous before God, and our nature is born again by His Spirit and Word, but even the definitive deed of Christ and the work of His Spirit do not remove our responsibility. We must by faith appropriate the deed of Christ for ourselves and therein want to be with Him; and we must also choose for our nature as that is being changed by His Word and Spirit. Neither the deed of Adam nor Christ's accomplished work takes away the responsibility of all who are reckoned in them. This applies in the same way to those who have sinned in Adam and who have not been saved in Christ. Furthermore, whether Adam had remained obedient or now that he fell, the necessity of his descendants to choose with respect to the state in which they were born, and with that necessity their own responsibility, is never removed. Even though they can now do no other than choose for the state in which they were born, yet with every sin they are also accountable for Adam's transgression.

One should not see any discrepancy between what was said above and what we just now wrote. Earlier it was noted that the responsibility of man as this was determined in God's counsel did not exclude the possibility of sin. We have sought to retain such responsibility with respect to all of Adam's descendants, even while for them the possibility to choose against their own state and nature was not present. To Adam as head God did give that two-fold possibility, thus also the possibility to choose against his state before God and to go against his own nature – for all his descendants that two-fold possibility does not exist. And the responsibility does not necessarily include the freedom of choice. Of course, there is a difference between responsibility and freedom. Man bears responsibility for his choice with respect to his own nature and state, even though in this choice he is not free. That is how Scripture puts it. Thus Jesus can say: *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling* (Matt.23:37), even though behind this unwillingness was the fact that they were by nature unable.

We bear responsibility for what we do willingly, even if that action of the will is restricted by our nature. We would never be able to understand this if behind our nature's lack of freedom was not Adam's responsible freedom in terms of his nature. We are considered in him, and together with him we bore and now bear the responsibility to God for our own nature. To be sure, we are not responsible for our own nature, but we are responsible to God for that nature. Now that our choice in Adam happened the way it did and therefore our nature became corrupted, we bear the responsibility for that corrupt nature and for everything that we do in agreement with its will and action.

Because man's responsibility continues to the end, in the final judgment God's love will also triumph and be glorified over those who have rejected that responsibility. Seen in this way as well, God's counsel is the counsel of His love in which Christ is central. When God's counsel is presented this way to us in Scripture, our faith is able to understand it, for faith can only comprehend love, and thus the revelation of God's counsel strengthens our faith. For when our eyes have been opened to God's counsel, and we learn to bow before Him in humility, we realize that we are known by Him in love, and understand that such love is not from yesterday or the day before, but from eternity. Moreover, this love that is from eternity takes in not only a few individual believers, but embraces them in their fellowship in Christ, and with them

heaven and earth. It is in this way that we believe God's counsel to be the counsel of His love, even if much of it in its outworking remains unknown to us.

This faith with respect to God's counsel is the victory over fatalism, for we know that our responsibility is being preserved. Such faith thus takes us away from a passive waiting, and does not merely make us live our life responsibly, but also provides us with eager anticipation in looking forward to seeing the wonder of God's love. This kind of anticipation is something different than only passively waiting to see how things unfold. Also in our prayers for the demonstration of God's love we face that responsibility. Prayer can be nothing else than a plea for the revealing of that wondrous love which we seek from the Lord, because by faith we must have fellowship with what we ask from Him and through faith we have no fellowship except in the love of God.

We can never become conscious doers of God's counsel in the sense that we would know beforehand what that counsel contained for us. In whatever measure God's counsel for the future as revealed for example in the book of Revelation, should be a norm for us in our actions is a question that comes later. That counsel in its specifics for our life is not made known to us. The reality is that those things that we do not know cannot become a rule for our activities. Neither must we try somehow to come to know them beforehand; thus we must not pay attention to signs in order to learn from them what "the way" is for us. If we should nevertheless want give heed to those signs, then no matter how we were to dress them in Christian vestments we would really do what the pagans did, for even though it does happen among Christians it belongs to sorcery, witchcraft, and soothsaying. We may never deal with God's counsel in this way. That militates against our faith in *God the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*, Who does not deal with us by impulse but according to the counsel of His love. When we know by faith that it is the counsel of His love, we do not wish to predict something, but with faith we expect the miracle of His love every day, no matter what may happen to us.

We do know that God even as we act in accordance with our responsibility carries out His counsel in our lives. And since we believe that it is the counsel of His love, it affords us great peace and constancy. Of course, we have a calling to live according to the spirit and intent of God's counsel, that is, in the fellowship of His love in which the gospel and the law of His love are our only norm.

## ***Heaven and Earth***

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth* (Gen.1:1). That means that God in the beginning of time created heaven and earth and that He made them both exist in time. God alone is the Eternal One, Who is eminent above time, and He made the work of His hands exist in time. Even though He will make heaven and earth continue without end – neither of them will ever be annihilated – they both differ from God in this that God is the Eternal One and they exist in time. In this is also evident the difference between Creator and His creature; and this boundary may never be erased. Even as Scripture tells us that by faith we have eternal life, it does not mean to say with this that we no longer live in time or will ever no longer live in time. Through faith we who live in time have fellowship and communion with the Eternal One. That fellowship can never be severed, and in that sense it means for us eternal life. And also after death and after the resurrection of the body we will not be above and beyond time. How our life in time then will be, and what time will mean for us then we do not know; but we will never be like God the Eternal One.

This ever remaining fundamental difference between Creator and creature must never be made into an antithesis. Through sin opposition between God and us has now occurred, but there is no incongruity in the fact that God is the Eternal One and we live in time. The Eternal One has brought forth time out of Himself, and how can we then talk of a disparity? Also the boundary to which we are now referring may not be placed between heaven and earth, as though heaven belongs to the eternal and earth to the temporal. Heaven as well as earth exist in time and it is with earth on the same side of the border line. As such however they are not both in opposition to God, and they are not as such the opposite of each other. What is true is that the conflict that took place between God and the earth through sin also produced the disparity between heaven and earth. That does not take away the fact that heaven and earth are on the same side of the boundary that exists between God and the creature.

The contrast between heaven and earth as originated by sin, all too often has been identified with the boundary between the Creator and the creature. Heaven was then deified as eternal, and the temporal as such was seen as sinful. The result

of this was that people came to despise “the earthly” or “temporal” things, and redemption was then sought in world-avoidance and world-flight. In this way the longing for heaven became a disobedient withdrawal of the earthly calling, for “the soul” was too good for this earthly world and longed to return to the heavenly, the so-called godly world to which it really belonged. The background of this entire perspective is the mistaken identification of the boundary between Creator and the creature with the disparity that now exists between heaven and earth.

The Bible can also equate *earthly things* with the sinful matters on which we should not set our minds. Then those things are in contrast with the *things above* (Col. 3:2). Scripture speaks in this way however precisely because of the disparity that now exists between heaven and earth. We must seek to live obediently, just as that is found in heaven where they bow down before Christ Who is seated on the right hand of God; we must not seek the disobedient life as this is done on earth in contrast to heaven. That this is the correct meaning of these words is evident from the context. For in the preceding verses the Apostle addresses the asceticism by which some seek to save themselves, and that is the disobedient life on earth in which they have withdrawn themselves from the rule of Christ’s grace in heaven. The verses that follow the quotation address sexual immorality and other sins; and also in these sins the disobedience of earth life is evident. We should never forget however that Christ seeks to reconcile heaven and earth with each other, and that we must strive to fulfill our calling on earth in the spirit of the obedience that is found in heaven. Therefore, *set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God* (Col. 3:1).

Scripture can also place the eternal and the temporal over against each other, as the apostle Paul writes: *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal* (2Cor.4:18). Certainly from this it would be impossible to conclude that the temporal in itself is sinful, for both heaven and earth exist in time. But it is true that life in time on earth has been given the curse of death because of sin. All things on this earth exist in this sign of the final catastrophe when the earth will not be destroyed, but the appearance of this world will pass away, for we read that *this world in its present form is passing away* (1 Cor.7:31). In this context then, Paul speaks about the wasting away outwardly. When in contrast to the things that one sees and that are temporal in the sense of transitory, he points to the things that are not seen and are eternal. And what he means with those eternal things is not life in heaven, but the eternal life that he has in the fellowship of faith with the Lord.

Thus the apostle writes, *Though outwardly [the outward man, NKJ] we are wasting away, yet inwardly [the inward man, NKJ] we are being renewed day by day* (2 Cor. 4:16). He does not mean that he himself or something in him did not exist in time and that therefore this inward man was eternal or divine in him. With the inward man he means the relationship of his heart in the fellowship of faith with the Lord. In the unbeliever there was also by virtue of the creation a natural orientation toward fellowship with the Eternal One, but that orientation did not develop because of unbelief. Thus, it is possible to say that in the unbeliever there is not an inner man in the sense of which Paul speaks of it. It would be for Paul and for every believer a sin if he mourned unduly the passing away of the things that one sees, and did not instead joyfully focus on the development of the fellowship with God – the eternal, that is not seen. With this, of course, we do not at all deny that life in this present age can be sanctified by the invisible eternal fellowship which we have with the Lord through faith. The temporal as such is not in conflict with the Eternal, for He created life in time.

Heaven and earth are both from, through, and to God, even as they exist in time. Both have been brought forth from His love, both are being directed through His love, and the purpose of both is to exist for the glorification of His love. From this three-fold perspective we need to see the relationship between heaven and earth in this Lord’s Day. Both heaven and earth have their origin in God’s love. In this respect they do not differ from each other. The love of God however did find a different and higher expression in heaven than on earth, and thus we read: *Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool* (Isa.66:1). The splendor of His love in heaven is revealed differently than on earth; yet both have the same origin.

This also means that they are made for, and directed toward each other. The earth is not complete without heaven, but heaven also is not perfect without the earth. Thus they find their fulfillment in each other, and jointly in God. It is a lack of appreciation for the nature of heaven if we should for the sake of heaven abandon or let go of the earth, for they are two reciprocally dependent sides of the revelation of God’s love in time. What actually the difference is between heaven and earth, and how they need each other will be considered in connection with Christ’s ascension.

However, we do need to say here that the central point both for heaven and for earth was in man. The love that God would give man was the main theme for the creation of heaven as well as for earth. Thus the angels who dwell in heaven all have their calling in the service of the fellowship between God and man, as Scripture indicates: *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation* (Hebr.1:14)? The purpose of heaven was that man also would inherit heaven, and in this angels have their calling. It is true that angels are already now observers of God's glory while man on earth still has to walk by faith, and in that sense God made man a little lower than angels; however, with respect to his ultimate destination man is not lower than the angels but above them. In connection with the fellowship that man through Christ has with God, we read that *even angels long to look into these things* (1 Pet.1:12). It is evident therefore that if man should have remained in his sin, it would also have meant that the existence of heaven and of angels would have been a failure.

Thus we come quite naturally to the second consideration, which is the existence of heaven and earth and that they are being directed by God's love. The existence of both in time entailed that there could be changes and transitions for both, and thus there could be a history. It is therefore possible to speak of a history of the earth, but also of a history of heaven. And both in their histories are guided by the love of Him Who is now the Mediator, Redeemer, and Savior of men.

While with the creation of heaven and earth both were made with a predisposition for and a relation to each other so that the one was not complete without the other, they were not yet integrated however. The integration of heaven and earth would come with the reception of man into heaven so that he would have dominion over both. Through the fall of man the conflict between heaven and earth came into being. Of course, there also had been a fall in heaven but it had not changed its nature. The history of heaven is not one of development, but one of sudden changes, and a period of warfare such as has been happening for centuries on earth is unthinkable in heaven. Furthermore, there is not an organic fellowship or unity of angels, nor have they come into being from one father and have not fallen in one head. Therefore the fallen angels are separated and heaven as such remains unshaken. But of much greater significance for heaven was the fall of man.

With the fall of man the purpose and future of life in heaven became an issue, and heaven had to turn itself militantly against the earth, which had been subjected to the curse. The battle, however, is to regain the earth for heaven as a result of God's decree in the counsel of redemption, and because God again came to the earth in the Mediator. Therefore the Bible can speak about the Kingdom of heaven, namely that the rule that exists in heaven must again conquer the earth. In that fellowship between God and man, and in the glorification of God's Name in it, the angels and heaven have their reason for existence. Thus it is that the angels are keenly interested in what takes place on earth, for they are not merely disinterested observers – their very purpose for life is at stake. One needs but think of the angels in the fields of Ephrata, and of the many appearances of angels and of the visions in the book of Revelation.

Therefore Scripture can say that God's intent was *through Him [Christ] to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross* (Col.1:20). Through the restoration of the fellowship between God and man in Christ, heaven has also been restored to the proper relationship with God, and thus again has found the reason for its existence before God. Thus, when Christ ascended into heaven and was seated at God's right hand, the original intention that man in heaven should reign over heaven and earth was fulfilled, and Christ as the second Adam sits at God's right hand. Scripture alerts us as we are in our lowly state of this principal fulfillment of God's original intention: *What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet. In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, Who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor* (Hebr.2:6-9). Even if the history of heaven is one of sudden changes, and has a different character than that of the earth which is one of development, yet they appear to influence each other continually and are also in this history dependent on each other.

This history will find its completion in the uniting of heaven and earth with the return of Christ. It is especially then that the work of the Holy Spirit will become evident, for then it will be revealed that all things in heaven and earth are also to God's love. The heavenly Jerusalem, the life in glory as that reflects heaven, will descend to earth. The tabernacle will then be with men, and the harmony between heaven and earth will then also make the earth a temple filled with glory. Then the praise of God's love will be fully revealed; that is, what that love in the eternal Word meant for heaven and earth.

We confess that we believe in God the Father as the Creator of heaven and earth. This faith can never be a dead faith. We must therefore see heaven and earth with their history in the light of God's love, for it is only then that we believe that faith alone is able to comprehend the love of God, and we have an abiding interest in the history of heaven and of earth for we are involved in both. But even as we often do not see the earth in the light of heaven, we also frequently do not see the unity of heaven and earth as our future home. And as we remain estranged from heaven – in this we go against God's counsel – we even know a certain fear. Yet what must overcome that fear, and what must make us confident in heaven is faith in Jesus Christ, in Whose ascension and glorification already now the communication between heaven and earth has been provided. On the one hand we do not need to withdraw ourselves from the earth, while on the other hand we do not need to be shy about heaven, for heaven and earth for us are both our inheritance from God, the Eternal One, Who created heaven as well as earth in time.

### ***My God and My Father***

Once again we go out from the unity of this answer. When we believe in God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, it means that we have faith in Him by virtue of His love as the Creator of heaven and earth, but also accept by faith that in that love He is *my God and my Father*. Moreover, these last two are interconnected. Thus, that God is *my God and my Father* Who is the Creator of heaven and earth, and Who therefore is able to provide me with all things necessary, and turn all adversity to my good. If the fact that He is my God and Father would be the only significant thing for me, while simply accepting the reality that He is the Creator of heaven and earth, I would not be able to see that love for me if I do not consider this love as the leading theme for the creation of heaven and earth.

For our faith things do not exist loosely next to each other. Thus, I can only see that God loves me when by faith I see God's love in all things. Only then I am part of the totality of God's works. If in pride I were to isolate myself from that, I would never be able to come to know God's love. Of course we do know that by faith we are called to have dominion over all the works of God's hands, but that does not mean that we ourselves are outside of this, since in fact we are part of it, and even belong to "nature." Only in this way are we able to see ourselves as the object of God's love. Our headship entails that God's love in Christ for all the work of His hands is meant especially for us.

Thus we cannot accept that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Creator of heaven and earth with a so-called historical faith, and then ask: How do I know that He is *my God and my Father*? Only by a true faith can we accept and defend in the face of all opposition that the love of God was the *motif* in the creation of the world, and still is in the governing of it; and that is then the faith with which we trust God in all things. Therefore, if we have that kind of confidence, we completely entrust ourselves to Him. This last factor cannot remain absent, for by faith we understand that God gives us this revelation concerning the work of His hands specifically with the intent that we should yield ourselves to Him. Faith is a deed of obedience with respect to that love, which calls for such confidence and trust. Should we believe that God is our God and Father? The fact is that we **should** not only, but we **must** believe that; and this applies to everyone who believes. Our longing therefore is always that we may come under the control of that love-demand.

Frequently another misunderstanding takes place in this regard. We need to see that the confession that God is *my God and my Father* is not something abstract. Thus we cannot expect that faith is present and still doubt *that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul*. The catechism does not describe something that is in addition to faith, but it defines faith itself when it states: *In Him I trust so completely as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul*. Faith consists of this trusting and confidence, and without it there is no faith. Thus, when we maintain that this is true for everyone who believes, we do not need to fear that in this way only an intellectual conclusion has been reached or a certain decision of the will in which true faith could possibly be absent; for true faith is never merely a matter of the mind or of the will, but it is always an act of confident submission. And thus, whether we are still anxiously wanting to look after ourselves, seeking to verify for ourselves the result and value of faith or whether in actual fact we depend for body and soul on God's provision, is immediately clear.

In this context it is significant that the confession mentions *body and soul*. A person could wonder whether he entrusts the eternal salvation of his soul to God, while continuing to fret about the daily necessities of the body. Faith proves itself

in matters right at hand. This cannot be repeated often enough, because we always have a tendency to make an abstraction of faith, and then we get confused talking about faith and the certainty of faith – discussions that are insoluble to us. Faith is that one act whereby we submit ourselves in all that we are in our whole way of life to God as our God and Father.

Through that faith we begin to see how the meaning and reason not only of heaven and earth, but also of our own personal essence exists in the love of God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even as heaven and earth have been created by God in order to demonstrate the glory of His love in them, so also my personal life has no other purpose than that I should receive God's love, and that He should glorify Himself therein. For this I have been born, and to this the whole design of my life is directed: that I should receive God's fellowship and communion. Perhaps it is not yet apparent to us at the beginning of our faith that our objective for life is in this: that the love of God increasingly captivates us so that it may control all of us. Then for us what is involved is not merely to receive an endowment of that love every time, but it is about that very love itself. We possess that love in the measure that this love possesses and owns us; that is, when we desire to yield ourselves to that love as the goal of our lives. When we always want to control ourselves, and then seek to receive some gifts of God's love, we are really beggars and not children of God. In this way the purpose of our life cannot and will never be discovered, for this purpose is contained in that love.

It is therefore only in this way that we can discover the intent of our whole life as well as that of the existence of heaven and earth, for the purpose of all things is the same as that of our personal lives. Thus, the science that functions without faith will never discover the purpose of life, or that of heaven and earth. For truly, without faith all the doors of life remain closed. The fact is that the world and life open up when faith is used, and then science can be of service by enabling us to discern that purpose more clearly. But when all is considered, science cannot really have a higher objective than that.

With that understanding of the meaning of life, God seeks to give us again the dominion, that is, the possession and enjoyment of our lives. In His grace God has connected in this instance understanding with ruling. *Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ* (Rom.8:17). That means all that belongs to God is ours as well. Heaven and earth are to serve us.

By this 'ownership' we must not be distracted from the love of God itself. All that we possess must serve to manifest that love to us. For what is involved in our faith is to know God Himself and His fellowship: namely, that which Christ has regained for us in the first place. For us He became the 'lost son'; through the way of suffering He has regained the Father's love for us; and thus He leads us also again back to that Father-love. *For the sake of Christ His Son* God is my Father and only through Christ do we come to know God as Father again. It is also in this way that through faith in Christ our full responsibility with respect to God is maintained. Moreover, we would trifle with God's love and with God Himself if we would speak about God as Father outside of and without Christ. For then we cannot see Him as the Exalted One, far above all His works – the transcendent God.

If some one would want to call God his Father without faith in Jesus Christ, the danger is there right away that he would exhaust God in and limit Him to His works, and he would no longer see the God Who placed before Him His works, and especially man in his responsibilities. People then would begin to speak about a feeling for nature, and how in their sense of being one with nature they are in accord with God's love. For them the experience in nature is equivalent to a church service.

We confess in this answer however that we see God as the almighty God Who is high above all His works, as well as a faithful Father Whose love is for me. Faith knows distance and fellowship, responsibility and atonement at the same time. We believe in God the Exalted One Who in His covenant is at the same time our Father in Christ. And that He is our Father is His determination according to His covenant. We confess that the creation is from God and not an emanation or product of the world. For our being His children did not come from God automatically with our creation, but is an action of His will and consonant with His covenant and is restored to us for Christ's sake in the covenant of grace.

In addition, that God is our God and also our Father has for us also this consequence that we know that we are not only children but also servants. We enjoy not only the Father's love, but we also serve God in the implementation of His plan

for the world. We do this consciously so that we may actively do His will and understand His call in our life and thus pursue it. But nevertheless, we must not consider His Fatherhood and His being God as two sorts of mutually independent relationships of God to us. For He is as Father our God, Whose Father-love contains unfathomable depths; and He is as God our Father Whose command to serve Him is the calling of His love. It is true that as God He is infinitely high, but as Father He is so intimately nearby and becomes more and more the High and Exalted God for us when He is so close to us. Thus we adore Him in His very love.

When He has caused us to be born into the fellowship of His love – and for my faith this is really true – He will cause all things to serve us in our fellowship with Him. Then *He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul and will also turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this life of sorrow.* For us that is a present reality when by faith we continue to focus on God as the *almighty God* and *faithful Father*. Then we receive not just a few gifts of His love; and could not only point to some remarkable evidences that God had turned a particular evil to our good – but then we believe that all things must serve to fulfill the purpose of our lives. And by faith we begin to see this ever more clearly taking place in our lives.

Through that same faith we see then that our life on earth is a veritable *life of sorrow*. That does not mean of course that in this life there is not also a lot of brightness, for the expression of Moses that *yet the best of them is but trouble and sorrow* (Ps.90:10) can be used pessimistically as ingratitude and a lack of faith. By faith however we see sin and understand that as a result of it there is the brokenness of life. Thus it is a joyful expression of faith when we say in the midst of it, and standing as it were on top of it, that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Creator of heaven and earth, Who is not ashamed of the work of His hands but even now still recognizes and accepts it as His work. And it is also a rejoicing in our faith in the midst of this brokenness when we say that *the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is my God and my Father*, Who still honors His Fatherhood of such children.

Moreover, when by faith we see that God is not ashamed of this world as the work of His hands, we are also able to understand that He is not ashamed to call us His children. How did God ever bring Job to believe in His love, which is never unrighteous? God did that by revealing to him that He still recognizes the Pleiades, the behemoth, the leviathan, and even the dumb ostrich as His creatures (Job 38-40). There is in all of creation much that is too great and too wonderful for us, and much that places us before mysteries and enigmas, but nevertheless God is and remains God of all of it. There is indeed much in life that puzzles us, but nevertheless we confess by faith that He is *my God and my Father*.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 10****27. What do you understand by the providence of God?**

*God's providence is His almighty and ever present power, whereby as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come to us not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.*

**28. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?**

*We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love; for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.*

***His Fatherly Hand***

Especially in a discussion of God's providence much is often said in abstraction. And with abstract reasoning we mean here an analysis that is detached from our faith in God as our Father in Christ Jesus. Of course, much could then be said about God's preservation of this world, about His cooperation in all things that happen on this world, and also about His governing. But in everything that was said, the point of view would be based on the so-called natural knowledge of God. Even as in every person there is the realization of the existence of God, there is in most people also the concept of His providence, however this might be understood. What they discussed then would be a widely held notion of providence.

For that belief of the providence of God they would then point to many things as so-called evidence. They would insist that all events could not possibly be mere coincidences. A person would not be able to live that way, they would say. And if everything that happened would be the consequence of an inviolable law of cause and effect, a man's heart would not find peace in it, they might add. Every person if life is to be possible for him is forced to accept that there exists a 'higher guiding power' they insisted. People could debate about how that higher power might be viewed, but the starting point would always be the so-called natural knowledge of the divine. At best one could attempt to show that this awareness of God's providence in us is confirmed by the Scriptures.

For us this entire line of reasoning has no value. With James one could ask: *Can such a faith save him?* (James 2:14). The dissatisfaction with such reasoning is readily understood. And because of that some have attempted to supplement it with a consideration of God's Father-love for His own children. They would then take their departure from the so-called general providence of all things, to which was then added God's special providence for His children. This second however remained loosely placed next to the first. In any case, God's Father-love in Christ was not central to how they wanted to view the whole of God's providence. The fact of the matter is that they were not all that far from supernaturalism, the kind that posits a general knowledge of God from nature, and which needs only to be supplemented by a supernatural knowledge of God for which one turns to Scripture.

In addition, there is something superficial about the way in which we sometimes comfort each other: "However, we do know that there is One Who directs everything." Yet, if we do not understand by faith that this "One" is our Father in Christ, that His Father-love is pivotal to the whole of His providence, and that His entire governance has as objective the strengthening of the bond of fellowship between Him and us, then even the awareness of all this will not comfort us. For

then we lack the comforting certainty that His providence will not mercilessly break up our lives. Perhaps at best one could try to hang on to a general sense of God's love that knows no justice, but such a concept of God's love is contradicted by Scripture.

The catechism in this Lord's Day does not treat God's providence in this way. Immediately in the first answer we learn that all things *come to us not by chance but by His fatherly hand*. Moreover, the second answer states that in everything that may come our way, *we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love*. In the catechism God's Father-love in Christ for His own in every instance is central.

After all that we have said in the preceding Lord's Day, it is not necessary to show at length that God's Father-love in Christ for His own children as central to His government of the world is not totally different than when compared with the situation before the fall into sin. The fellowship in which God through the eternal Word sought to relate to people, constituted the foundation and controlling theme at the creation of the world; in the same way it is the point of departure and dominating theme in His providence. After the fall into sin God resumed His original intention and purpose and has carried it through, in the sense that now His fellowship is centered in the incarnate Word. From this perspective the entire confession of God's providence should be viewed, and every appearance of supernaturalism avoided. We know God by faith from the Scriptures as our Father in Christ Jesus, and thus we are able to understand something of the works of His hands in the history of the world. His preservation, His cooperation, as well as His government can only be understood rightly in that light.

It is in this way alone that the faith of our hearts, faith through which we are saved, can be engaged with God's providence, and with God in His providence; for our faith itself can only know God in His grace in Christ. Without this faith in God as the Father through Christ, God will remain for us a God from afar. Regretfully with the discussion of His providence, God has frequently remained a distant and remote God, while especially through His very revelation of this in Scripture He wants to be a God Who is near to us. And for our hearts He is only near in His love in Christ.

We become even more conscious of this when we do not overlook the Holy Spirit in the confession of God's providence. Apart from the Father in the confession of the providence of God, we must not only think of the Son as the incarnate Word, but also of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ. In considering this doctrine, it is possible that a person would normally think of the special work of the Holy Spirit and point to the statement of Scripture: *When You send Your Spirit they are created, and You renew the face of the earth* (Ps.104:30), and still remain abstract in his reasoning; that is, apart from God's Father-love in Christ for His own. God's Spirit is for us also with the confession of God's providence especially the Spirit of Christ, in Whom we receive God's love. Through that Spirit God dwells in this world with His love, and with that Spirit He is deeply moved with the history of the world. Thus we have completely overcome the idea that for us God is a God Who is ever distant and remote.

By His love in Christ emanating from His Spirit, He is very much affected by the course of events. Scripture can say some very strong things about this. It speaks about *the yearning of Your heart* (Isa.63:15 NKJ). In speaking about His people, we read that *in all their distress He too was distressed* (Isa.63:9). Furthermore, Scripture warns that when *they rebelled [they] grieved His Holy Spirit* (Isa.63:10). These expressions of Scripture however may not give us cause to speak of a 'suffering God', as if God would be subjected to suffering. But rather, Scripture reveals in those expressions the compassion and care of God in His love in Christ through the Spirit. And that revelation sustains and supports us in our suffering. Truly for us He is not a God from afar if He can be that compassionate with our suffering!

When we confess God's providence in this way there is nothing abstract about it. If God as our Father in Jesus Christ in all the work of His providence has in mind His fellowship with His children, and in that love is moved with compassion for His whole world, then we are by faith with Him in this entire work of providence. Then nothing of it happens without our heart's involvement or without our love for Him. For then we are in the first place concerned with the whole world for His sake, and recognize in that sense fellowship with Him in that work. There remains then no place for abstract reflection; but in faith and motivated by love we meditate on this activity of God. And thus also in our thoughts about it we are with Him by faith.

## ***God and His Providence***

There was a time when some people preferred to refer to God as Providence. The distinction between God and the work of His hands evidently had vanished, and for many His providence was the sum total of God. It seemed that He was no longer known as our God and Father, as our Lord, as the covenant God in Christ, and as God of the Word, that is the Word of His covenant; and it appeared that they perceived in God nothing other than “Providence.”

During that time, moreover, people were deeply impressed with all that was automatic and systematic in the happenings on earth, for everything took place with unimpeded regularity according to determined laws and regulations. The reliability of these events was reason for continual joy. For them God was really not much other than the structure or composition of all those laws and regulations. And this was not even deistically considered, for deism views a god that is above all of life and knows no compassion or involvement, and without involving himself, observes how everything unfolds according to the laws imposed by him and by means of the forces once created. Deism knows no providence. But then neither was that view pantheistic, for with mystical pantheism there is always the idea of a hidden reality that by way of development must come to visible expression. When they referred to God as Providence, neither the idea of a God Who is far above the world, nor the thought of something mystical was present. Everything was clear and transparent, and they did not believe in anything that went beyond or above this world and its history.

This view was also accompanied with optimism: the world is good and its history gives us reason to rejoice about the way the world is arranged and progresses. It is true that there is also suffering and misery, but these should be considered the necessary shadow on the portrait to draw attention to the light. Of mysteries and unsolvable problems they knew nothing, and were quickly done with an explanation of the world. They considered everything marvelous on this material world. Of course this would not be the view of all, particularly not those who were miserable and oppressed; yet those mainly satisfied with life, that is the general population, thought this world the best one possible. God was completely vindicated, for He had prepared this world as good and suitable as possible.

Generally speaking, mankind has now been roused from this optimistic delusion. Disasters have followed each other, one after the other; a guaranteed livelihood for many has disappeared; tranquility is not returning, and fear has developed that it may never come back but that instead we will continually be shaken by new traumas. Is it any wonder that very little is left of that optimistic world view, and that instead pessimism in constantly changing form is assured a place in the hearts of men? Not only has an accusation been leveled against God because they looked only at their envisioned world, but also in the Christian church pessimism made headway so that they began to speak of the permanently dominating results of sin that even in principle God’s grace could not take away.

Such constant pessimism necessarily must have its consequences for the prospect of the relationship between God and His world. In fact, nothing remained of the view of God as Providence Who had arranged things so perfectly, and Who in all His works was predictable and all could depend on Him. Now however, for many God became the threatening enigma behind all things observed. He became the unpredictable factor Who as far as humans could tell functioned with complete arbitrariness, and paid no attention to any law – in other words, a mystery to be feared. Thus God became the Hidden and Unknowable One. He is with respect to this world filled with its sin and misery, a remote God from afar. People could really generally only perceive a contrast between God and this world. And by preference people referred to those statements of Scripture that speak of God’s exalted holiness and His austere righteousness.

Given that outlook, how could they still speak of God’s providence? The difficulty becomes evident when we continue to distinguish between God’s providence, His cooperation, and His government; and then what presents the greatest problematic is connected with God’s government. That God maintains and provides for this world is still conceivable, even if there were not any evidence of His grace. After all, hell, the devils, and the lost are also sustained by God. Thus it is conceivable for us that God would cooperate with everything in this world even if the power of His grace that works for good was not involved. It is in this way that God is also involved in all activities and the goings on in the place of darkness.

The difficulty appears with God’s government, at least if we maintain that this government and control mean directing the world by His grace and love in Christ. How can God by the Spirit of His love dwell in this world in a governing manner,

when its history demonstrates nothing but aversion for His grace and love? If the history of this world and of our lives as a result of sin should be considered only as meaningless, how then can it be maintained that a purposeful love of God governs and guides the development of the world?

Nothing remains then but for people to escape into the paradoxical, accepting yes and no at the same time. And God's love would then have nothing to do with the course of this world, and yet would be directing its progress. However, it is impossible to accept that this world's history should have no other purpose than demonstrating the power of sin, and with it the antithesis between that world and God's grace in Christ. Undoubtedly the world is also being driven forward on its sinful way as a result of the revelation of grace, but this is then a revelation of grace in the very history of the world – the result of God's grace has after all in Jesus Christ become flesh and blood and by His Spirit also in those who are His own.

Therefore, the two points of view mentioned above must be rejected: superficial optimism as well as enigmatic pessimism. However, without any doubt at all we must agree that we cannot comprehend God in His providence. Moreover, when it is the providence of His grace in Christ – and it must not be seen otherwise – even then and especially then it must be admitted that such love functions in ways that far surpasses our comprehension. Especially in relation to His grace and to His redeeming love it is said of God: *My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts* (Isa.55:8,9). Furthermore, God's love is also the love of His holiness by which He maintains and honors Himself in all His providence. The attitude of faith, also with respect to God's providence, is in the first place one of adoration and submission, a mind-set of trusting also when we do not understand; in the way *Moses persevered because he saw Him Who is invisible* (Hebr.11:27). Thus, we have no room for a superficially optimistic worldview that claims to understand all things as though they were transparent.

Nevertheless, this does not make us turn to enigmatic, mysterious pessimism. For by faith we know God in His love in Christ, and therefore we recognize often the hand of His love as He leads our life and that of the world. For us life is not merely purposeless, and does not only show confusion, contradictions, or mysteries, for we see and experience the meaning of our life in a growing fellowship with God. Moreover, we also recognize the purpose of the world's history in the continuing struggle for its sanctification in Christ. The believing approach to life also entails that we never doubt the revelation of the redeeming and healing power of God's love in Christ for our time, but that we expect that redeeming power in all relations every day again. By faith we keep in mind that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead and that His resurrection means the resurrection of life in this time unto fellowship with God. When confusion and clashing differences become evident, we believe in the victory over sin and misery by the power of God's Spirit of love that is in this world, even if that victory should come through catastrophe.

### ***God's Preservation***

The first focus in God's providence is His preservation. There is some objection to treating this separately, even as there is against the separate consideration of God's cooperation and of His government, because this three-fold work of God is so interrelated. It is preferable to speak of a three-fold perspective from which we view that one work of God's providence rather than to consider it as three distinctive actions of God. And yet we cannot avoid a distinct and separate consideration of each of these three features. Thus after a separate consideration of each we will attempt to view their unity.

With God's preservation we confess that God maintains all things in their existence. With this we have immediately indicated that things do not have an existence or a reality from themselves or by themselves. God alone exists in Himself. Thus if God even for one moment were to withhold His preservation, all things would cease to exist. God has created the world and all that is in it not as a capricious whim, for He is faithful to the work of His hands. Therefore we know that the world will not cease to exist, not even when in the last catastrophe it is destroyed by fire. Yet this should not blind us to the reality that everything that is, is maintained by God each moment of its existence.

A number of questions come to mind right away; yet in order to be fully consistent we must first confess God's preservation in this way. Herein faith in God's providence according to the Scriptures distinguishes itself from a view of providence that is sometimes found among pagans. Such a pagan faith in providence goes no deeper than that the gods

see the requirements of creatures beforehand and also provide in those needs. For them therefore, it means a providing in the needs of creatures that exist on their own, and who consider that the reason for and the origin of their lives is in themselves.

Over against such a faith we confess that all things have their existence in God and in His will. If God changed His will about them they would no longer be, as it was before the creation. It is with this in mind that some have referred to providence as an ongoing creation, and in the measure that they seek to indicate with this the supreme nature of God's work of preservation, something positive could be said about this expression.

Yet it is in this way that the distinction between creation and providence is lost sight of – a distinction that Scripture makes by saying that God rested on the seventh day. Of course more could be said about God's resting, but it means at any rate also in this instance that God stopped creating. It is clear that a delineating boundary should be drawn between creation and preservation, for God's preservation does not mean a continuing to call into being things that do not exist, but rather, it means maintaining the things that were once created. God's providence presumes a creation of the presently existing things, and interacts with that creation.

It is here that we come upon a difficulty that we encounter in all of God's providence, in His cooperation as well as in His government. How should we see the relationship of God to the creature, and that of the creature to God? On the one hand we confess that all created things have a distinctive nature given by God, and we reject every thought of pantheism that unifies God and nature. On the other hand with equal firmness we reject the idea that things exist in and of themselves. God has given all things their own distinctive nature, and He reckons with that nature in His providence. With respect to His preservation it means that God's providence of His creation varies. The same is true with His cooperation, in which He respects the powers and functions of creatures and things that He once gave them at creation. Man in relation to God has been given his own responsibility in the matter of His government.

There is no possibility that there is a solution to the problem that we encounter here, for we are unable to comprehend fully this relationship of God to His creatures and we cannot truly understand God in His works. Already with the existence of things we come up against a relationship we cannot figure out. By faith we must confess that all things are dependent on God's will for their very existence; yet it is also true that God's providence presumes the creation of all things and thus also their existence, and in that providence He allows and leaves them the nature and significance He once gave them.

Also in the discussion of this difficulty we must start with our faith in God as our Father through Jesus Christ. For it is also the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ Who has given all things their station and substance, and for that reason preserves them. Scripture reveals that when we read: *He has spoken to us by His Son, Whom He appointed heir of all things, and through Whom He made the universe* (Hebr.1:2). Moreover, *the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His Being, sustaining all things by His powerful Word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven* (Hebr.1:3). When it says that the Son sustains all things by His powerful Word, it means that the Son maintains all things and thus preserves them.

Why would God by speaking, that is by His Word, have created all things, and why does He sustain all things through speaking – by His Word? We note that by His Word, as He created, He gave all things their significance and purpose; and by His Word, while maintaining them, He preserves that purpose. For in fact all things do not exist meaninglessly, but each has its own value and purpose – its own determination. And what Scripture reveals also is that it is especially the Son Who has given it that purpose and preserves it. Thus the Son as the eternal Word, or as stated in Hebrews, *the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His Being* – the Son Who now has become flesh, and Who has provided purification for sins, He is the One Who is appointed as the Heir of all things. All these expressions tell us that in the Son God's love came to us, and that through the Son we have fellowship with God. In that love of God through the Son therefore rests the central purpose, the principal meaning of all things. Thus Scripture is able to say that *He is before all things, and in him all things hold together* (Col.1:17).

Through these considerations we have progressed a little further in answering the question about the difference between God's creation and His providence. In any case it becomes clearer that God does not create anew moment by moment,

but in His work of providence He maintains the once created meaning and purpose of all things, leaving them the value and significance accorded them in creation.

With this determination of the purpose of all things, all as a demonstration of God's love in the Son for His own, we observe another difficulty. If all of creation must reveal to us humans what God seeks to be for us in the Son, what is the value on this earth of all those creatures that are never seen by men? To use a well known illustration: what value has the life of a flower that grows and blooms in the loneliness of an impenetrable forest, and then dies without even one person being able to see the glory of God's love and give Him the praise and glory for it? Has not that flower existed in vain?

We must indeed admit that much in this world still remains unknown to man. How much of the treasure God placed in this world has only been discovered by later generations; and how much is yet hidden from us! However, that does not prevent us from accepting that the purpose of earth's creatures is in the glorification of God by man who sees them and views in them the love of God. After all, for this purpose God gave man the command to populate the earth and to develop it. We read in the creation account that *God blessed them and said to them: Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it* (Gen.1:28). Only through faith can we trust that what man did not discover of the great abundance in God's world did not fail in its intended purpose, since this world really is one organic whole. There are not only the angels, but God Himself has rejoiced in the glory of the earth, which He prepared for the people He loved.

God sustains the living creatures on earth, the plants, animals, and people by means of the oxygen in the air, the food from the earth, and also through other means. Believers have frequently hesitated to make use of particular means for the preservation of their lives and for the provision of their needs, for fear that it would harm their faith in God as the Provider of their lives. We mention merely the issues of the use of medication in sickness, vaccination against communicable diseases, all possible insurances, and also of the lightning conductor. Especially those who insist on prayer for miraculous healing seem more likely to reject the use of means.

It is possible to designate this view as a lack of faith, for faith always adheres to obedience. If God has assigned to us the use of means, it is disobedience and thus unbelief to reject these means. And with this refusal of means there is always the temptation to elicit a miracle from God. For such persons it may be belittling or disparaging to wait by faith for God's answer through the means, since they expect Him to answer miraculously. This is a lack of faith, for they are not satisfied with the ordinary way in which God reveals Himself and they seek to force a wonder by rejecting the way of means. Scripture calls this a tempting of God. The attempt of this kind of testing of God appears to be very strong for those whose faith is weak. Christ overcame this temptation when He refused to jump from the pinnacle of the temple. The devil sought to get Him to force a miracle out of God in the sense that God would command His angels to carry Him in their hands. Christ rejected the temptation with the words: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test* (Luke 4:12). It seems as if Christ has suffered this temptation in vain for some believers!

With the question of the relationship between what God does and the effectiveness of the means, we begin to touch upon the next subject that comes up in a discussion of God's providence, namely His cooperation. We treat this subject more fully below. Here we raise only this single point that also with respect to these means Scripture alerts us to the importance of the word of God for their functioning. Thus we read: *Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Matt.4:4). That is the word through which God at one time created those means and now gives them their role. Without that word they would not have been created and now would be without effectiveness. That their operation is maintained only by the word of God suggests that the purpose of those means is evidence of God's love in Christ. Therefore, we will only then live by His love in all things and in the way that His love is coming to us, when we do so in humble, obedient use of the means. It is in this way that our obedience is tested, and without this our faith in God's love cannot exist.

### ***God's So-Called Cooperation***

With God's cooperation we understand that God as the first cause controls all the movements and acts of His creatures as second causes. What we must determine here first of all is the distinction between God's works and the functioning of the once created abilities. We have here once more the question of the relationship between God and His creatures in a

different form. Also here we must assert that the activities of God cannot be identified with the actions of the creatures. For when the distinction between the two is not kept in mind it would again constitute pantheism.

Moreover, the skills and talents that were once created by God must not be considered as able to function on their own. On this subject Deism has especially expressed itself and suggested that since God had created those natural abilities and their functioning placing them under certain laws, it would not be necessary for Him to involve Himself further. Those creatures and powers would function all on their own without God Himself being active in their operation. We need to reject also these deistic perspectives, since Scripture teaches us that *all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move* (cf. Acts 17: 24-28).

What is involved here is the determination of the actual relationship between God and the functioning of His once created powers, skills and abilities. For that purpose the word cooperation is particularly unsuitable, and a number of objections readily come to mind. In the first place it gives the impression that God and those forces of nature operate alongside of each other with a certain measure of independence. And with that point of view we would immediately come in contention with the above mentioned teaching of Scripture in Acts 17. All powers only exist and continue to do so by the will of God and by His providence, and moreover the activities of those forces are determined by God every moment. That is what God's Word teaches us when it says that we receive life, breath, and all things from God, *for in Him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17: 28). Thus it is unthinkable that there could be a certain independence of those forces in their existence and operation so that they could work alongside of God.

Furthermore, we raise also this objection against the concept of 'cooperation' with God, namely that He is not the partner or co-worker of His creatures. Of course it is true that Scripture does speak of a certain collaboration of God: *Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed His Word by the signs that accompanied it* (Mark 16:20). However, that is a cooperation of God in a different sense than we intend here. In Mark we read of the blessing that God in His grace gives on the work of the apostles, and how He enables the spirit of the apostles, gives them words to speak, and guides their feet. Thus that He in His covenant blesses us with His grace is something different than that He determines the activities of all His creatures. Even if we should see the relationship reversed and should speak of all natural powers as God's co-workers, it would nevertheless assign a measure of independence to those forces in relation to God. And to call upon the words of 1 Corinthians 3: 9, that the apostles and evangelists *are God's fellow workers* is not enough because the meaning of that expression is doubtful.

Scripture does indicate the relationship of God to those powers of nature quite clearly with other words. We read: *Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve You* (Psalm 119: 91), and: *He [God] sends His command to the earth; His word runs swiftly. He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes...He sends His word and melts them* (Psalm 147: 15, 16, 18). Thus He speaks of the creatures as God's servants who obey His commands. In this way, on the one hand the distinction between the functioning of those powers and God's works is maintained, as well as the special place and significance of those powers in God's great work. But also, on the other hand, God's word through His Spirit is a word of power. Through His command He makes those powers work, and in this way the working of those powers is also a work of His Spirit. Therefore Scripture can say of the budding green in the spring of the year: *When You send Your Spirit, they are created and You renew the face of the earth* (Psalm 104: 30).

When we see the relationship between God and His creation in this way, naturalism is overcome. In its expression *that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come to us not by chance, but by His fatherly hand*, the catechism directly opposes the assertion of chance, but at the same time it also rejects all naturalism. Thus, all things do not come to us from "nature" operating according to its established laws, since nothing happens in that nature "by itself," for it is God Who makes all those forces function by His word and Spirit. Of course, there is in that action of God – and therefore of those powers of nature – an established regularity. That is why we speak of the laws of nature. However, those laws of nature do not suggest that there exists in those things themselves a requisite causality. Instead they point to the constancy of God's deeds, and to which regularity He also subjected the functioning of the forces of nature. It is God's order of things that produces particular consequences for specific causes.

When we confess the presence of God by His word and Spirit in this fashion in all the activities of this world's forces of nature, the objections that have often been raised against miracles disappear. As long as people view a number of

successive happenings as an iron chain made up of links of cause and effect, they have no place for miracles in the history of the world. However, when they see God's presence of His word and Spirit in all that happens, it becomes evident to them that He is able to deviate from the established regularity and interrupt this through miracles in which He does not use the normal factors, but calls upon other powers through His word and makes them function by His Spirit. Moreover, those miracles may seem irregular to us, yet in the totality of God's work they are indispensable. The miracles of which Scripture tells us are redemption miracles. We note that creation and recreation do not form a two-fold plan of God, in which the second plan would be an intrusion on the first, for creation and recreation are part of the one single plan of God, and in that one plan the redemption miracles have an indispensable significance.

It is true that at present those miracles no longer happen as they did in the past. But the reason for this seems self-evident. In the past miracles were necessary for bringing about and revealing the redemption of Christ in this world. Today however, only the miracles of application of that salvation are necessary. And those miracles such as regeneration continue to happen also in our day.

The confession of God's providence, especially His so-called cooperation, is a victory over naturalism. This naturalism in its contemporary form, no matter how varied it may be, has only surfaced during the last centuries. However, in its religious form it is indeed ancient. The worship of Baal in Israel and in the surrounding nations was a religion of the deified forces of nature, indicating therefore a religious naturalism. And when we observe the battle against such obstinate naturalism, it is clear that it cannot be conducted in the Name of an Almighty God Who would not have a covenant relation with His people, but in the Name of Yahweh the God of Israel. It is in this way that Elijah placed Yahweh over against the worship of Baal: the LORD is God! Also Gideon, who was brought up by his father to serve Baal, was called upon to choose the service of Yahweh Who wanted to reveal Himself again to Israel through His servant Gideon. The LORD is God as He in love seeks to give Himself in Christ to us in the covenant bond. And only by faith in the LORD as our God and Father through Christ are we able to take up the struggle against naturalism, and not by a scientific debate about God as the world's ever-working "Superman."

What have we really understood of the word of God by which He gives commands to all creatures as His servants and puts them to work, if we have not heard God's word in which He speaks to us of His grace and love in Christ? There is an extremely close relationship between that two-fold word of God. Through the word of His love in Christ He reveals the meaning of all things to us; that is, all things must serve in the fellowship between Him and us and thus also for His glory. And in order that they are subservient to this, He activates them by the word of His command and thus also gives meaning to all that happens. He works in all that lives and moves here below in no other way than as the covenant God in Christ. And it is the wonder of faith to encounter that God in all the activities and movements of creatures. Thus also the confession of God's so-called cooperation is a confession of faith in God as Father through Jesus Christ. In our fellowship of love with Him we do not find ourselves in a strange or hostile world, but in all the activities of His creatures God is the same that He is for us in His love in Christ.

It is evident that this confession entails many difficulties when we see the misery and the revelation of God's wrath in this world, but we will consider this when we focus on His government. Here we merely wish to say that when God in His anger gives His creatures as His servants a command and thus uses them, and when we therein see the hand of God in the disasters, we must not doubt that He Who effects this is the God of love in Christ. What we need to see is that this love also exerts its justice – and therein its anger and judgment – when rejected! Our God Who in Christ Jesus is indeed our God, is in His actions frequently a consuming fire.

### ***God's Government***

With the confession of God's government, His preservation and so-called cooperation are presumed and included. And with His government we understand that He leads all things toward the objective determined by Him, namely the enhancement of His glory in full fellowship between Him and His own, and in complete glorification of all creation. Therefore, with God's government we deal with the purpose and the guidance of all things toward that goal. And for that management it is necessary that He sustains all things, and also "cooperates" in the activities of His creatures. On the other hand it is certain that there can be no consideration given to God's "cooperation" in the preservation of all things,

without it having as its objective where He is leading it. There is movement in the history of the world, and it is that progress we consider when we speak of God's government.

At this point we have come to the most important part of God's providence, that is, to what is most significant in the implementation of God's counsel. For God's providence includes the entire outworking of His counsel, apart from the creation of all things, of course. In that implementation of His counsel, His government is the most important fact that His preservation and "cooperation" assume and include.

Here it is readily evident that it is very difficult to consider preservation, "cooperation", and government separately; in fact, government without preservation and "cooperation" is impossible. Therefore we will need to refer to these other two sides of God's work constantly, or at least they will be continually involved as we consider this third element.

In the explanation of what we must understand with God's "cooperation" we noted that God gives all creatures commands by His word, and thus makes them functional by His Spirit. Already then we spoke of a certain governing, and cited from the Scriptures that all creatures are His servants. However, with that we had not yet focused on the reality that the governing of all things has a predetermined goal in mind, and it is that management that we now discuss specifically. But, even as God's "cooperation" presumed His preservation, so also His government presumes His "cooperation." And with that government or guidance we think especially of the realization of His counsel.

God's government does not apply only to people and angels – His creatures who have self-consciousness – but also to all other creatures. He directs all that happens toward the goal that He determined, and not only the acts of men or angels. With people themselves, not to mention angels at this time, distinction must be made between matters in which God governs them and wherein they have their responsibility, and those in which He leads them without their responsibility being involved. God demands of us submission and obedience to His Word, and for all our actions we bear responsibility. Yet He can also, for example, give us sickness and in this way determine our future. We need to make sure that we clearly distinguish between these two.

In these matters we must not forget that the two factors mentioned could at any time interact with each other. Sickness could be the consequence of a sin, even if it were only the neglect of our health. Conversely sickness and all sorts of adversity can motivate us to sin, or could in fact bring us back to the pathway of obedience. In this way therefore there are all kinds of relations between these two categories in God's government, and in that connection we must keep the distinction in mind.

In the process of considering the so-called cooperation we observed that God has commanded His creatures and thus also makes them active. Through that activation He governs them as well, since such enabling is not without objective. Moreover, when that directing and governing is still outside of the realm of human responsibility, it takes place at God's command, that is, by His word. In this instance we write "word" in a lower case in order to distinguish it from the Word of God by which He directs and governs people in their responsibility, whether they obey that Word or not. Thus in this instance we write "Word" with a capital letter. With this we mean to indicate the Word of God that comes to us in Scripture. Of course, there are all kinds of commands from God for men in their responsibility, also those not in Scripture. For instance there are numerous laws in the world itself or in "nature" that humans knowingly must keep. That these are not merely "laws of nature" but that in them the will of God for human life is evident, is known to us from God's Word of covenant, first in the covenant of His favor and now in His covenant of His grace.

Through the Word that God spoke to man He intended to have him become aware of his responsibility and to teach him obedience. It is in this way that we observe the central point of God's command to man in his responsibility is in the Word of God. It is also true that there is a very close connection between the two kinds of words of God, that is, between that word to all creation outside of human responsibility and that Word for man in his responsibility. As highest goal in His creation God desired a man who as a responsible creature obeyed His Word, and in that way had fellowship with Him. Moreover, it is with this purpose that God governs all creation with His word of command so that all of them are His servants.

When we see the Word of God by which He addresses us in our responsibility as an integral part in all of His providence, and especially that of His governing, we are kept from viewing God's providential arrangement as a chance that happens

to us without us having to bear any responsibility for it. We need to reject two wrong ideas at the same time: first, that man determines his own lot in life, and second, that we have to submit passively to the destiny assigned to us. The fact is how we relate to the Word of God, whether we obey it or disobey it, determines our future to a large part; and yet it is equally true that God makes His decision separate from our responsibility. It is possible to live with considerable anxiety regarding our responsibility in life as well as to accept from God's hand what He has determined for us.

When we hold on to these two aspects we avoid both the arrogant idea that man determines his own lot in life and is the master of his destiny, a thought that easily changes into fatalism when we experience failure, but we also do not enter into an attitude of complete passivity without a sense of responsibility and accountability. Moreover, we may not develop a perspective either that those two concepts – accepting our own responsibility (and also in submission accept what God determines but to restrict each, in the sense that we would bear responsibility for some matters), and secondly, determine precisely to which issues we would submit passively. Setting such limits is impossible since that two-fold work in God's governing continually interact with each other because the Word by which He addresses us in our responsibility controls the word through which He outside of us governs our accountability. For us therefore our responsibility comes first, and when adversity comes to us we have to think first of our guilt; but nevertheless we confess that we are also in the hands of God Who governs us even in our sins.

Here we approach the question of what the relation of God's government is to our sins, a subject that forms a component of the general relationship of God's government to all our deeds. To speak of a permissiveness of God when it involves our sinfulness is in most instances improper. However, in a specific sense it is possible to speak of God's tolerance, and then with this meaning that He limits the full outworking of the consequences of His grace and holds this back, allowing a certain space for sin. Thus Christ gave permission to the demons to go into the pigs and did not bind them before their time (Luke 8: 32, 33). That does not mean that this going into the pigs and that general happening of sin takes place outside of God's "hand". That wrong idea is frequently intended when speaking about God's "permissive" will. In fact, this view is against Scripture which teaches that *to man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue* (Prov. 16:1), and also that *a man's steps are directed by the LORD* (Prov. 20:24).

We must never think only of a negative attitude of God with respect to our actions, whereby He refrains from active involvement in them, for we *are so completely in His hand that without His will [we] cannot so much as move*. Moreover, by referring to God's permission we would not have advanced in any way with the problem of whether God bears responsibility and guilt for our sins, because granting permission when one is able to prevent, makes one equally guilty in lending a hand to do evil. According to the Scriptures we must confess definitely that God's hand is also in our sinful deeds; and that is clearly taught when we read that *He [God] incited David against them saying, 'Go and take a census of Israel and Judah'* (2 Sam.24:1). Even as God's hand is in all our deeds, it is also in our sinful deeds, for every moment all our actions are influenced by God's governing 'hand'.

Thus, when we view God's so-called cooperation in the light of His governing, not a trace of a thought can remain that this "cooperation" is a factor alongside of or in addition to the causes that are present in things. With God's government therefore we have to think especially of the influencing of our thoughts and decisions by God's Spirit Who stimulates our spirits. Since the devil can influence us spiritually, how much more can God's Spirit do that! And such influencing by God's Spirit can be for good or for evil. In fact, Scripture indicates this clearly when God incited David to count the people, as noted above, and also when God used the king of Assyria against Israel *to seize loot and snatch plunder and to trample them down like mud in the streets* (Isa.10:6).

Yet with this God has not become the agent of sin. For when God motivates the already sinful spirit of man to continue in sin, He is not unjust in this but it is a punishment as He frequently punishes sin with sin to make us see the consequences of sin and how it increases the judgment. In addition, when God does this with believers, it means for them a certain judgment on their sins, although this will not be the eternal sentence. Moreover, God then leads matters in such a way that through His victorious grace those believers see even more of His saving love in Christ. And frequently additional consequences of blessings may be seen in these deeds of God. Thus, by means of David's census the rod of punishment and also of purification came over all Israel; and sending the Assyrian king against Israel also constituted a correction for God's people.

That does not remove, however, man's responsibility for his sinful deeds, since God's government also and in the first place is a governing by His Word of covenant in which is spelled out the norm for our life – and by that Word all of David's desires should have been governed. That happens when the law of the Lord through God's Spirit and Word are again written in our hearts. And as often as we choose against God's Word, that choice is also ruled by God's Word, but it is a being ruled for wickedness. The Word of God, that is the Word of His love and of the justice of His love, from the very beginning brings a crisis in life. The entire world of pagans is controlled by the rejection of the Word of God, and through it the nations are estranged from that Word and have perished in their idolatry and ignorance. It is in this way that the Word of God produces a crisis for the whole world and propels it and history to its final end.

When we discuss God's government we must think especially of His government by His Word. Calvin states: *When therefore David teaches a number of times (as in Psalm 93, 95, 96, 99 and others) that false religions must be removed from the world so that true religion may prosper, he speaks of God as Ruler. And he means with the word **reigns** not the power that He holds and that He exerts in the government over nature, but the instruction wherein He shows Himself as having lawful authority. It will never be possible to remove the errors from the human hearts, until the true knowledge is planted in them.*

With the above description we certainly have not explained the origin of the first sin. In dealing with Lord's Day 3 we explained that the origin of sin is and must be inexplicable to us, and every effort to explain it is an attempt to remove from us our responsibility. Man's first sin involved deliberate willfulness, and that characteristic describes all sins resulting from it. And yet the origin of sin did not occur outside of God's providence, and also took place within the outworking of God's counsel. However, we must not see that sin as a necessary factor in the development of the world, a concept where one-sided supralapsarianism may be in danger of ending. But then they would with the acknowledgment of God's providential leading in the fall into sin eliminate man's responsibility and have to deny the nature of sin.

However, one may not assert either that sin caused God's first plan for the world to fail, and that God for that reason in place of the first design in which Adam was central, has set up a second plan for the world wherein Christ becomes the central figure. With this concept, and that is where one-sided infralapsarianism may end up, one would deny God's providential rule in keeping with the one decision in His eternal counsel. Nevertheless, God's design is one and thus there is also the unending guidance of His providence ever since the creation of the world. God intends to glorify His love in the fellowship He seeks to maintain with mankind and thus He has implemented His love anew, retaining its honor and even enhancing it when in His providential leading according to His single decree in His counsel sin entered the world.

God directs all things in His providence for the enhancement of the honor of His love, first in the eternal Word and now in the incarnate Word. Thus, the coming of Christ as well as the fall into sin must be viewed as within God's providence, as also all the miracles of redemption. Perhaps we should mention that it is here that an error is frequently made in dealing with the discussion of providence. The coming of Christ and all His work of redemption, and thus recreation, is sometimes viewed as being outside of the activity of God's providence, which is then limited to the sustaining and governing of "nature." When seen in this way, the plan of redemption then of necessity becomes a second 'world-plan' that overlaps the first and puts it aside. It is then that the miracles, the salvation by Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, the church – in one word all of recreation – is seen as extra to creation, and thus supra-naturalistic.

With that kind of view one cannot really maintain that the miracles and especially the wonder of the incarnation of the Word are not something abnormal and strange in God's original plan for the world. Then they should really speak of two kinds of providence that needed to be explained from a different *motif* or idea each time. People arrive at this improper view because they lose sight of the fact that already behind the creation of the world and thus behind the general providence, God's love functioned in the eternal Word and now in the incarnate Word. Moved by love, God in His providence made the Word flesh and also performs all the miracles for redemption. The fact that the bond of love between God and the world was breached by the fall into sin does not constitute an objection against the view presented here, because it was the same love with which God again in Jesus Christ reached out to the world.

When God's love in the now incarnate Word is the leading theme in the work of His providence, it is evident as we asserted above, that with God's government we must first think of the government by the Word of His revelation. For in that Word He speaks especially of that love. Moreover, we will then also have to think of the Spirit as the Spirit of His

love and as the Spirit of Christ. By that Spirit He governs and guides all things. By that Spirit He makes the grass and the flowers to appear in the spring of the year. By the Spirit of the LORD, that is the Spirit of the God of the covenant, we read: *You renew the face of the earth* (Psalm 104:30).

By that Spirit Whom we sadden every moment through our unbelief as well as by our wrong use of what is created, God lives with His governing and guidance in our hearts and thus in the world – that is, with the sensitively perceptive Spirit of God’s love. Thus God is moved by that Spirit in all His governing of His world, and therefore we bear our responsibility every moment over against that Spirit of God’s love, and we also have to be emotionally stirred in our hearts in all these matters. Then the entire perspective of God’s providence as an abstraction with respect to our faith and redemption is put aside. We believe in God Who by His providence leads the world and us to deliverance.

Therefore in the matter of God’s providence the honor of His love is at issue every moment. In this activity He is for us not a God from afar, but from nearby. And every moment in that work that He also judges and condemns, He measures and weighs, but He measures by the intention and weighs according to the value of the love He gave. He becomes offended in the Holy Spirit and He rejoices as well. In one word – in His providence He is the living God, and as Scripture says He knows the ways of men. That means that He examines them with the judgment of His love. That applies to all people, and thus also to the unbelievers. Scripture states that *though the LORD is on high, He looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar* (Ps.138:6), meaning that He examines and evaluates them. He does not observe with indifference the lifestyle and the choices made by unbelievers, for also in their life the honor of God’s love is at stake and thus the matter is not one of apathy at all. We read the awesome words of Asaph: *Surely You place them on slippery ground; You cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when You arise, O Lord, You will despise them as fantasies* (Ps.73:18-20). When God knows them from afar it is that He with deliberateness turns away from them, yet in such a way that the wrath of His unacknowledged and rejected love is poured out on them.

How totally different God is in the lives of His own, for in their lives He gives Himself in His love. That love is also evaluating and examining, discerning and judging; it rejoices but also is offended. Frequently we have dispensed with God’s providence far too easily by dealing with it abstractly and one-sidedly. If God invests Himself and the honor of His love in His providence, then we are also moved and stirred in His passion, and our life becomes living in the billows of His affected love, and yet being saved by it.

### ***The Unifying Factor in God’s Providence***

After these separate considerations of God’s preservation, “cooperation,” and government, we must now address the work of God’s providence as a whole. Of course, mention has been made of various things already as we discussed God’s government, assuming His preservation and “cooperation.”

There is a certain danger in unraveling the totality of God’s providence. For in doing so one can present many views about God’s preservation; “cooperation” is likely to be less extensive, while with government the one-sided comfort of God’s work is often highlighted.

However, when we consider God’s providence as a whole and as a unity, and then seeing how it culminates in His governing, its dynamic quality and with it our responsibility becomes evident. In this world God is always the One Who works and we are not left alone even for a single moment, for with every breath we need to act and decide. God forces us to do this and every instant is really a crisis that contributes to the final judgment, and for us it is an action unto life or death. It is in this way that God’s providence encompasses our life and at the same time places us before the utmost responsibility every single moment.

We can withdraw neither the small nor the big items from this vast work of God’s providence. When we start from the idea that God directs life toward a particular objective, namely the honor of His Name, and that He does this in the complete fellowship with those who are His, and in the glorification of all that is created, it is self-evident that all things, great and small must serve to reach that goal. Thus Jesus declares: *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one*

*of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Matt.10:29-31).*

That also means that all those minor happenings must serve His purpose, for His will is not arbitrary; and thus everything exists so that at the end of history He will reveal Himself fully as our heavenly Father. It is for that reason that nothing in this world happens by chance or is even completely controlled by forces within this world. To be sure, there is not a special area of life on this world where chance or fate dictates events or where the law of cause and effect rules supreme, while there would be another domain in which God's providence functions. Scripture disposes of all these ideas and teaches us in the catechism that *all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.*

We need to continue to confess that nothing happens outside of God's providence, and that God's action, that is His *hand*, works according to His plan, even when what we observe in this world and in its history appears to be absurd. With this we do not merely think of death and destruction that we find here, and about which Paul writes: *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the One who subjected, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom.8:20,21).* In all of these disasters faith is able to discern the judgment of God's love that leads to the complete victory of that love, no matter how differently they happen to believers and unbelievers.

Moreover, we also think of the last chapters of the book of Job in which God reveals Himself to Job as the Creator of monsters such as the leviathan and the behemoth, as well as of the mindless ostrich. God is not ashamed in those chapters to be the Creator of all these creatures. Undoubtedly there has been deterioration in the world due to the fall, but in His recreating work God has not forsaken the work of His original creation in the way an ostrich forsakes its nest. Instead, for Christ's sake He has again accepted the world and all that is therein, and according to His single plan of creation and recreation leads this world with all its apparent absurdity ultimately to the glorification of His Name.

When we begin with the principle that God's Name is hallowed to the greatest extent in His full and eternal fellowship with His children in Christ, it means that we see what God in His providence does with His people as the central feature in all of His providence. We thus reject a consideration of this doctrine in which the first focus is on God's general providence in which the Name of Jesus Christ is not mentioned, and whereby secondly God's special providence for His own is considered. Moreover, the entire reflection we have presented here thus far of God's providence suggests a rejection of that distinction in the sense it is often made. We can speak of God's special love for His own, when we view it as the leading *motif* or central theme in all of God's providence. The catechism also posits the life of the believers centrally in God's providence when it notes that *God's providence is His almighty and ever present power whereby He upholds all creatures, and so governs them that all things come to us not by chance but by His fatherly hand.*

Therefore it is essential to keep in mind the unity of God's providence, and with that the one plan according to which God carries out His providence. That does not take away, however, that the various aspects of preservation, "cooperation," and government come to us clearly from Scriptural revelation in their own way. As a child we begin with believing in God's preservation. And it may well be unshakable for that childlike faith that the sandwich on the table is from God, and that Dad and Mom are given by God, and that God will answer the prayer for healing of sickness. All of this is in the immense realm of God's preservation. After that, we as young people of fifteen to twenty come into contact with the problem of God's "cooperation": how is it possible that everything happens "naturally" and is governed by laws, and yet everything is in God's hand?

We will not find a satisfactory answer until we sense the imperfect and improper inference of the expression "God's cooperation," and begin to consider that God is ever the first One Who operates everything. Then we begin to realize that according to Scripture God's "cooperation" indicates a mandate, as also the Belgic Confession notes, *that in this world nothing happens without His direction (Art.13).* That directive of God does not suspend the intrinsic value of the creatures as His servants. However, we have in principle and by faith overcome the difficulties when we have seen that as conscious creatures we have the calling to be God's servants in the great work of His providence.

Later on in our lives we have to deal with God's government. But increasingly we begin to understand how our lives are controlled by this and brought into the judgment of God's love; that is, how it is taken hold of by the power of God's

Word and by the necessity of the choice. It is in this way that life for us – by nature responsible living persons – becomes ever more responsible. But nevertheless, what unites all of this: being busy with God’s preservation, “cooperation,” and government, is that in it we relate to God as Father. It is in this way that faith is active with this doctrine, and only by faith are we able to understand any of it.

### ***How Does This Faith Benefit us?***

God is not depleted nor expended in the work of His hands, and thus not in His providence either. He is the Exalted One, and far above His works. It is for that reason that there will be much in His providence in which our mind and comprehension cannot follow Him. When one places God and providence on the same level and then seeks to trace the laws of that providence, a person may have optimistic expectations of being able to fathom the entire system. However, when we by faith have learned to worship and adore Him Who is far exalted above His works, we would find it obvious to agree with Job: *And these are but the outer fringe of His works; how faint the whisper we hear of Him! Who then can understand the thunder of His power* (Job 26:14)?

It is therefore that the confession of providence does not merely bring comfort, for this work of God so full of riddles, and continually places us before the greatest struggles. Only by faith are we able to maintain that the wisdom of His love may be seen in the course of world history and of our own lives, and that these serve to reach the goal that God has determined for Himself, namely the honor of His Name in the full fellowship between Him and His own, and in the glorification of heaven and earth.

Only when we fix our eyes on the cross of Christ are we able to gain the victory in that contest. Christ was consumed by the justice and wrath of God’s love in order that He in the way of suffering and death would reconcile life and thus raise it to God’s favor. Our redemption is to belong to and be part of the way of Christ. For even though He has taken away our guilt and judgment, the path for us is also to die in order to live. For God’s people this entire life is therefore like the burning bush Moses saw: though it burns in the fire of the zeal of God’s love, it is not consumed. Thus we live by faith and not by observation. Someone may well note that this is easier said than done. And of course this is true. The problem is that often we do not rise above the circumstances that keep us down. We hasten to add that such an observation provides no excuse. In fact as often as we do not rise beyond the circumstances of our life, what is missing is that we are not fixing our eyes by faith on the love of God that leads all things.

We should not try to escape the weight of this accusation by reasoning that we do believe in God’s providence, but at this moment it is just not comforting. If we are not comforted by it, God’s providence and His love are at such a time not a reality, and then we do not believe with that faith by which we are saved. And surely the Lord’s reproach comes to us: *O you of little faith, why did you doubt?* (Matt.14:31) The fact is that focusing on God’s love that never fails, and thus to be with Him, lifts us above the anxiety of difficult circumstances.

In addition to these first comments about the enigmas of God’s providence, further remarks have to be made. We need to mention that it is ever so easy for us when we consider the significance of God’s providence for our personal life to see that providence merely as a lot to which we must passively submit ourselves. Yet, in the above comments our responsibility has constantly been stressed as something we should never forget. If we should live with God’s providence only in a passive sense, such a life would in fact cause us to die in the most literal sense of the word. We cannot hold on to God and cling to Him in His providential order with respect to all things, unless we know that in this we are His responsible servants. Submission and responsibility are not mutually exclusive, but require each other. This submission is in its nature not passive but displays great activity because it is a submission of faith. And such faith-submission stimulates us every day again to action.

We confess in the catechism that *we can be patient in adversity*. Especially in this it is evident that the submission of faith does not suggest an attitude of passivity. We note that God leads us at times in paths where it seems to us all light is missing – that is, all light that is not the light of faith in His loving presence. We see such light only when we submit ourselves to His guidance. That is not passivity, but a conscious choosing for the darkness because God considers that necessary. That is what it means to take up one’s cross consciously and thus being actively involved with that suffering.

However, if we do not accept it with the act of faith we do not really submit ourselves either. For then we assume the appearance of submitting ourselves passively, but secretly escape the suffering through fantasy, and begin to dream of other circumstances filled with happiness and we surrender ourselves to those dreams. That is one way in which at least our mind seeks to evade the suffering. And then we have not truly and fully accepted it and have not received it out of God's hand either.

We have to choose for that suffering, because by faith we see that it is God's love that has assigned it to us. And then we also know that God shapes and directs our life in the crisis of His protective love in order that we should learn to glorify Him as Father. It is in suffering and affliction that we are often closer to knowing His paternal love than we are in prosperity, for then the danger exists that we think we understand God's providence. In adversity we are forced to acknowledge God as God, the Exalted One Who is far above us even in His love.

In prosperity and by faith we are to be thankful for God's providence. Thankfulness is something different than delight. We often say that we are truly thankful while it really is nothing other than happiness. Being thankful to God is always an act of faith; and there is thankfulness only when by faith we are aware that in the blessing God in His grace is giving Himself to us, and not merely when we appreciate what He did or gave. Thankfulness exists only in the personal faith-relationship to God in which we receive and confess Him as our God and our Father. Unfortunately, it is frequently the case that we do not see God's love in His gracious gift, or after we did see this at first we close our eyes to it disregarding the Lord's blessing as we do so often. Being *patient in adversity* as well as being *thankful in prosperity* is an act of faith through the Holy Spirit. All too often however when do not learn to perceive God in our prosperity we fail to see Him when adversity comes along. The sad reality is that we tend to learn so little in life whereas it could teach us so much; however, only faith that observes the Lord in all things is suitable for learning.

For the future we are to have *a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father* we confess. That confidence in God also means an assurance that He will take care of our faith so that we will not fail to have faith in time to come. We must not ask beforehand: should such or such an attack or temptation assail me, will my faith be able to resist it? Faith that is from God is also sustained by His grace, and we receive from Him what we need when we need it. Thus also with respect to our faith and its future we must believe and trust in God. In all things we look to God.

Furthermore, we must live in the confidence *that no creature shall separate us from His love; for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move*. The fact that all creatures are moved by His hand means that they are moved or led by Him Who in Christ is our Father, and it means that they cannot be against us for that reason. Thus we do not consider ourselves separated or detached from God -- not even for one moment. The purpose of God's providence is in the glorification of His Name, which He has established in the full fellowship between Him and us, and thus the glorification of His Name also indicates that He ushers us into that full fellowship. In the history of the world God and we are in this matter together and therefore for us the outcome is undeniably certain. It is impossible that we should be separated from His love because in His providence the most important purpose is our fellowship in that love. Should we then be shaken up by the events of life, by faith we cling to this one certainty and thus it is that we do not doubt, knowing that *in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him Who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rom.8:37-39).

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 11****29. Why is the Son of God called Jesus, that is, Savior?**

*Because He saves us from all our sins, and because salvation is not to be sought or found in anyone else.*

**30. Do those who seek their salvation or well-being in saints, in themselves, or anywhere else, also believe in the only Savior Jesus?**

*No. Though they boast of Him in words, they in fact deny the only Savior Jesus. For one of two things must be true: either Jesus is not a complete Savior, or those who by true faith accept this Savior must find in Him all that is necessary for their salvation.*

***The Son of God and our Salvation***

The catechism begins its treatment here of the second part of the Apostles Creed focusing on the Son of God and our salvation. This section must not be isolated from the other two. This must not happen for we would never consider isolating the Son from the Father and the Holy Spirit. And it must also not take place because God's action of redemption cannot be isolated from that of creation and of sanctification.

Even as the Father alone is not the Creator of the world, neither is the Son alone its Redeemer. Just as we need to confess the creation of the world and also the work of providence as deeds of the Triune God, we must also do this with His work of salvation. Of course we confess that the Father has sent the Son into the world for salvation, and that the Son also in all His deeds of redemption was motivated by the Father's love. Moreover, our Redeemer was conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, as Gabriel announced to Mary: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you* (Luke 1:35) and He also *through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God* (Hebr.9:14). We must especially cling to this reality that these Three are one.

In all of redemption we see the love of this Triune God, and not one of the three Persons must be forgotten in this or placed in the background. When that should happen it would be evidence that we would focus redemption too much on ourselves and we would not primarily see God in it in the glory of His grace. As soon as we first of all think of ourselves in redemption we are actively exploiting God for ourselves, and we would then have no objection if one of the three Persons were placed in the foreground for our benefit. When in our salvation we see especially God, of necessity we have to deal with the Triune God. And there is danger in teaching children to put the Name of Jesus too much into the foreground, for that may nurture an unspiritual egoism in covenant youth, and in such a setting the result could easily be: Jesus for me, and not: we for God also in redemption.

The relationship of the second part to the other two becomes even clearer when we view redemption in distinction from creation and sanctification. But redemption must not be isolated with respect to creation, for with salvation we are not dealing with an infralapsarian perspective of a second world view after the first one failed, for sin is not an accident or an unforeseen happening in a first plan. Sin also formed a part of God's counsel of eternity. Yet on the other hand we must not see creation from a supralapsarian point of view either, as if creation were merely a temporary or provisional act of God that would in due time be replaced by recreation. We repeat that creation and recreation are both in the one counsel of God.

Furthermore, God's work of redemption must not be viewed as separated from that of creation, as though it were something new in place of that creation. For if this concept were consistently carried through it would lead to "the gospel of a strange god," different from God the Creator, and furthermore it would also lead to the assertion that in such salvation a god would be revealed who would have little in common with God the Creator and His works. The connection and relationship between creation and salvation must not be abandoned. And at all costs we must confess that with salvation or redemption nothing other is meant than the restoration and praise of God's act of creation. We need to accept however that in redemption there was an additional factor revealed about God's love, which was the *motif* and motivating force in creation, namely the power to overcome sin.

In addition, God's act of redemption must not be isolated from that of sanctification because then we might well consider salvation as God's work, but sanctification as a human responsibility in semi-pelagian or nomistic fashion. This must not happen, furthermore, because then one might consider salvation exclusively a matter for the present age, and divert sanctification entirely to the coming age. In such a case one could then only proclaim a constantly repeated transitory justification, while the proclamation of a present and continually progressing sanctification would then not be heard.

If redemption means an actual restoration of the reconciled relationship between God and man, and if man actually is to live in that relationship, it would have to entail an application and initiation of that reconciliation and thus a beginning of sanctification in the present time. Of course in order to prevent isolation, a distinction between salvation and sanctification always clearly needs to be kept in mind. And with redemption we understand, when we distinguish it from sanctification, the restoration of a reconciled relationship between God and man, the obtaining of God's grace for man, and the creation of the possibility of a new fellowship between God and man.

This reconciled relationship is received from man's side through faith, and it does not come to everyone; that is why this second part of the Apostles Creed concludes with the doctrine of Christ's return to judge the living and the dead. We understand with sanctification in the broadest sense the victory over the consequences of sin for the whole world, the healing of the creature, or to use the words of Scripture: *that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God* (Rom.8:20). It is in this way that sanctification must be the fruit of redemption.

If redemption means the restoration of the reconciled relationship between God and man, and if it is also a being received into fellowship again, then it seems almost self-evident that the Son or the eternal Word in Whom this fellowship was once given, restored it again by His work. However, as with the original fellowship the Triune God was involved, so also is the Triune God involved in the restoration of that relationship. Nevertheless, we see especially the Son in the work of redemption. Thus we confess *about God the Son and our redemption* (LD 8).

### ***The Name Jesus***

God made the name Jesus known to Mary by the angel Gabriel, and in a dream to Joseph (Luke 1:31, Matt. 1:21), and thereby revealed God's counsel in this matter. The Name *Jesus* must have been determined specifically in God's counsel of redemption, the covenant of the three Persons concerning our redemption. In that counsel of redemption, we understand, it was decided that the Son would be the Mediator and Redeemer. Thus Scripture speaks of Christ *as a Lamb without blemish or defect...chosen before the creation of the world but revealed in these last times for your sake* (1 Pet. 1:19,20). It is in time, then, that God named Him with the Name chosen in His eternal counsel.

We must take note of the fact that God knows events and matters before they happen and not merely afterward. That is, they do not take place and then God realizes it, since He knows them from eternity because He determined them in His counsel, and therefore they happen. It is clear that this is also of significance for the names that God gives, for those names contain according to His eternal counsel a prophecy that He fulfills. Thus to Abram God gave the name Abraham, and through that name subsequently the history of Abraham and his descendants was guided and directed. To adduce another example: Christ gave the name Peter to Simon, making out of the emotional, volatile Simon the dependable rock Peter. It is thus the name as the prophetic revelation of God's counsel that determinatively influences life. We observe that it is hardly necessary here to say that this determining prophecy in the name does not remove the person's own activity and responsibility. Thus Abraham needed to expect the increase of his descendants in faithfully yielding to the

promise given; and Simon through faith in the promise concerning his name would have to become Peter after many internal conflicts.

In a special sense this applies to the Name Jesus. The counsel of God revealed in that Name governed and influenced not only the life of Jesus on earth and all that followed thereafter, but also the entire history of the world before it occurred, not only the history of Israel but that of all nations. That Name was contained in the promise of the Seed that was to come. The nations that disregarded or abandoned this promise sank away in spiritual darkness; the nation of Israel in God's election retained the promise, and lived in the light. Here also it is evident that being governed by the prophetic revelation of God's counsel does not exclude human responsibility.

In fact, the whole history of mankind needed to be controlled and even governed by the Redeemer's Name in the sense that they would by faith expect the fulfillment of the promise, and in that believing expectation they would participate in bringing forth the Redeemer, even as Abraham and Sarah by faith were able to have Isaac. However, in spite of their indifference and rejection, the history of almost all nations is influenced by the Name of the Redeemer. Still, only in Israel by faith they continued to expect and thus they produced the Redeemer.

With this of course we do not deny that much in the preparation for the birth of the Saviour took place by the Holy Spirit in spite of the unbelief in Israel. That becomes especially clear in *the record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ* (Matt.1:1). Already the birth of Perez and Zerah from Judah and Tamar convinces us of that. Still, life then also was controlled and directed by the promise that the Holy Spirit caused to be fulfilled in spite of the sinful deviation of people.

Thus *the record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ* or the record of "the becoming" of Jesus Christ demonstrates that the prior history in a determining way was influenced by the Name of the Redeemer. For here is a genealogy in which it is intended to become evident not that the descendants were shaped by their ancestors but rather the other way around, namely, that the ancestors were directed by their descendants.

In addition, the history after Jesus' life on earth is being influenced and guided by the prophecy of the Name of Jesus, and in the saving of the nations Jesus needs to be recognized increasingly as Redeemer. In a certain sense, the history of the world could also be written as the book of "the becoming" of Jesus Christ. And what is meant is that the Redeemer increasingly needs to become better known in the lives of those nations and in the citizens of those peoples. If the nations do not by faith see and fulfill this calling that is placed before them in the prophecy of the Name Jesus, and instead continue in their folly, they are nevertheless still controlled by that prophecy. Also then however the Holy Spirit works for the fulfillment of that prophecy in spite of the people's unbelief.

Therefore with the Name Jesus we need to view the promise in the way that it comes to us throughout all of God's Word. The entire Word of God is related to the Name of Jesus, and reveals that to us at length and in depth. Through the Name Jesus as God has made it known we are immediately ushered into the whole of God's revelation in His Word. If in fact then the entire history of the world is guided and directed by its prophetic manifestation, we need to be submissively faithful to it in our reading and thinking. And that is the reason why in the catechism the names of the Savior are considered so extensively. For herein is expressed that we want to know nothing about the Redeemer but what God has revealed about Him. We do not seek to place a certain experiential knowledge about Jesus next to or above what God has revealed in His Word, for everything we come to know about Jesus through life's experience is dependent on and subject to the revelation in God's Word.

There is no need to ask how the Word is related to that experiential knowledge, for such knowledge cannot be anything other than faith-knowledge, and faith is always related to the Word. It is in this way that the catechism defines faith in the first place as *a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word* (LD 7). Thus from the very start faith is related to and anchored in the Word. When in Hebrews 11: 1 we read that *faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*, the entire chapter spells out the faith that is focused on God's Word. In our faith we are controlled by and dependent on the Word of promise as well as the Name Jesus, and thus we also reach experiential knowledge in the relationship with Jesus.

In this respect there can be no difference between this second part of the Apostles' Creed and the two other parts. Thus we may not reason in this way: that God is the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, everyone knows without

God's Word by means of the so-called natural knowledge of Him resulting from general revelation. And the fact that the Holy Spirit is given to me and works eternal life in me, I also know without the Word of God, namely through direct mystical fellowship with the Spirit. But that Jesus lived on earth for a time and brought salvation, I can only know from the historical information in the Bible. That God the Creator of heaven and earth is Father, and in love also my Father, I can only know through faith from the Word of God. The Holy Spirit's work in my heart becomes known by faith in the Word of God, and becomes known truly only through believing that Word. It is in this way that all three parts of the Apostles' Creed speak of coming to know by believing God's Word.

Of course, there is this difference that the second part deals primarily with historical facts which took place in a specific time period, while the concluding lines focus on events that still lie in the future. Moreover, it is self-evident that we could obtain those facts in no other way than from the historical givens of Scripture. It does raise the question when we thoroughly consider this historical character, of how those facts in their consequences and results are able to continue to function today. How can I have fellowship with Jesus in His humiliation? How must we understand that even now *the Lamb looking as if it had been slain standing in the centre of the throne* (Rev.5:6)? We will need to pursue these matters somewhat more later in our commentary on this Lord's Day. However, we wish to observe already now that such a past becomes a living reality today through faith in the Word of promise, which we view as guiding and controlling the entire history of the world and also our own life's history. (1 John 1:1-3 especially applies here.)

Thus, believing in the Name of Jesus means in the first place having faith in God's Word, and it explains why Scripture places such great emphasis on the Name. For instance: *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved [than the Name of Jesus]* (Acts. 4:12). Here the Name is seen as the Word of promise, which we may believe and thus determines our salvation.

### ***The Name and Jesus***

We observe that frequently faith and experience are actually played off against each other. For those who do this, the propositions would be like this: "Through faith in God's Word we have all we need" over against: "What really matters is the experience of God's fellowship." We raise this matter here because it appears in the following contradistinction some people make. Some claim "All we have to do is to believe in the Name Jesus," while others maintain "What really matters is to have fellowship with Jesus." In this matter two issues surface. The first one is: What is the relation between the Name of Jesus and Jesus? And the second one: What is the relation between faith in the Name of Jesus and the experience of fellowship with Jesus?

The name seeks to reveal the essence or nature of a being. That is different than saying that the name is an expression or disclosure of that being. With this we tend to think of a verbal or written statement of what we have observed and learned about that being. "Revelation" makes us think of a living force, and in fact in that revelation the being itself as it were comes to us.

With the Name Jesus we not only have to deal with an explanation of what the Name means, but with the living and working revelation of Jesus. For the Name is the Word of God and thus goes out from the Father and is given with the Son as the eternal Word, and is the Word of God sustained and confirmed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, what God gives to us in Jesus as the incarnate Word, is what He expressed to us in the eternal Word. When we said above that the Name of Jesus, that is, the prophetic revelation in that Name, has controlled and does govern the history of the world, it means that Jesus rules the history of the world. We need to presume the closest possible connection between the Name of Jesus and Jesus.

Because Jesus is well-known and close to us in His Name, what happened many centuries ago can now be present with us on a daily basis, and in the same way we are also able to see *the Lamb looking as if it had been slain standing in the centre of the throne* (Rev.5:6). The Name as the living revelation of Jesus and of everything about Him makes what once happened in history a living reality today. In His Name the power of His suffering and dying as well as of His resurrection still goes out to us. That applies also to the centuries before the birth of Jesus for those too were controlled by the prophecy of the promise given, and also through Jesus Himself and by the fruit of His work that would be completed by Him many centuries afterward.

It is only in this way that we are able to understand that it is not when events actually happen that God first designates them for His purpose, but that these events are decreed by God in His counsel, and therefore they occur. In that naming or designating by God the fullness of the happening is contained, for it is God Who fulfills His Word and makes it happen. Thus the designation of *the Word* does not refer to truths related to the eternal generation of the Son, for that generation exists above and outside the counsel of God; but *the Word*, as well as the Name of the incarnate Word Jesus must have been determined in God's counsel. Thus in that Name was contained the fullness of the event to take place. In this way that Name and with it Jesus Himself, Who already existed as the eternal Word, with the fruit of His work controlled the preceding centuries as well as those after His arrival on earth.

How close the connection between Jesus' Name and Jesus as a person is, we will have to accept by faith. Yet we must not forget that the Name, that is the Word of God, brings forth the events. And therefore the Scriptures constantly point us to the Name, and we learn to believe in the Name. We also need to accept that the Holy Spirit fulfills the prophecy given in the Name, often in spite of people and despite their unbelief. Already earlier we referred to the illustration of the birth of Perez and Zerah from Judah and Tamar (Matt.1:3, cf.Gen.38:29, 30). Related to this we confess the direct action of the Holy Spirit in our hearts – preceding faith, as He opens our hearts in order that we may believe (Acts 16:14). That does not take away that the Name especially has been given to faith and for faith, so that faith would be serviceable for the Name. As the Holy Spirit opens our hearts in order that we should believe, so everything He does in spite of the people for the fulfilling of prophecy that is given in the Name of Jesus, in order that through faith in that Name, salvation would be realized in the world. The Name offers itself to faith and by rejecting that Name in unbelief, people will then have to submit to that Name in the judgment.

With the Scriptures we therefore emphasize that the Name of Jesus was *given to men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12). And faith is directed toward and focused on the Name. The question is asked: In this connection how is the relationship with Jesus then? When there is such a close connection between the Name of Jesus and Jesus Himself that the Name is the living revelation of Jesus we are assured that in calling upon the Name in faith, Jesus Himself appears in the sense that He enables us to experience His fellowship. With this we maintain that we are required to believe the Word of God in this way, for there is no other way to experience His fellowship than by believing His Word. And we must struggle in faith and contend for the faith. We need to read the Word of God constantly so that it may enter our thoughts and accepting it by faith Jesus may be real to us. For in that knowledge and awareness of Jesus the salvation of our lives is assured.

It is not as though in life we simply need this or that, little or much, but we do need Jesus and in Him we receive the fullness of God's love that is given to us in Him. We are not healed through talking or reasoning, not by suggestions or emotions, and not in experiencing beauty nor by a friendly word either, but we are healed by Jesus Himself – by His love and through His fellowship. We may experience the darkest depression, but when Jesus is present again all becomes light for us – as it were in a single moment. There is something vibrant and appealing in His fellowship that takes us along, that carries us over mountains and seas, and even from the darkest depths it delights us suddenly with vital energy and unfamiliar vistas. It is really all about this fellowship with Jesus: a communion that truly restores our life. We can hardly say enough about the fellowship that comes by faith in His Name.

Even when we know about the healing of life through communion with Jesus we must admit that we still have spiritual difficulties – times when we cannot attain or experience this fellowship with Him. At such a time we need to consider matters closely. Those spiritual deficiencies do not happen to us arbitrarily or without reason. We are not thinking of specific sins that are obvious. With those sins we willfully break down fellowship with Jesus. It should be noted however that at times it is difficult to recognize those sins, and we do not always know them because we do not want to know. The fact is that they are not clear to us since we subconsciously suppress them. It is also possible that we harbored sins of which we were not aware, but these did not stand in the way of God giving us fellowship with Jesus. But slowly, and in ongoing fellowship with the Lord and by its perpetual nurture, God begins to hold us accountable for those sins and starts to withdraw Himself from us, in order that we should recognize them and turn away from them. In this respect there is much to learn being in communion with Jesus. For a long time God may overlook sins which He at His time will draw to our attention with the light of His countenance.

However, we are not thinking here of specific sins as the cause of our spiritual lapse. There could be all kinds of distressing circumstances that give us the feeling that God is against us and has dissociated Himself from us or at least withdrawn Himself. It is also found in the Psalms where some describe the complaint of being forsaken by God; yet they are not referring to a direct “spiritual experience,” but to stress or anxiety from other causes resulting in such sentiments. That strain can originate in a variety of ways. There are multiple sides to our lives, and almost as many possibilities for stress. To mention some: Our faith can be contradicted by visible things, and sometimes severely tested and tried; our love can be disappointed and saddened; our concept of justice can be insulted; our sense of beauty can be impacted unpleasantly; financial worries can depress us; the influence we thought to be having can be disillusioned; our thinking can be confused; people can hurt us; sickness can affect us. Every time there is one cause or another, and sometimes several together can produce stress and tension in our lives in which we go through a kind of spiritual depression.

Such an experience is not just a mistake or misunderstanding on our part in the sense that we think that God is against us, while He actually is entirely for us. Of course, we can assume things; for there is such a thing as spiritual imagination that seeks to make us more interesting to others and to ourselves! Now it is true that God can turn Himself against us in a certain respect, while at the same time His eternal love in Christ remains for us – for love and wrath are possible at the same time. Thus when God is against us in any way, the reason for this does not necessarily suggest a particular sin, for it is also possible that God tests us because of sin in general of which we too are guilty. What are we to do? In this case it certainly cannot be said that it was only unbelief that was the cause of this estrangement, for faith guides us in life and must have done so in this instance as well. We certainly need to deal with this matter, but we must focus on it by faith. That means in the first place that we must not surrender to it but wrestle so as not to give up our confidence that God in His love in Christ is eternally for us.

However, that is not the only thing. We need to examine and determine the reasons for the stress in our life, and often we find then that they cannot be taken away and that we instead have to accept the matter as a thorn in the flesh. And in a situation of this nature we will have to deal with it by faith, in the sense that we confess that this chastisement even though we may not deserve it specifically, comes upon us because of sin in general. And every punishment has as purpose that we bow more deeply before God because the guilt of our sinful nature. It is therefore entirely possible that God will not remove the burden but in the way of our believing acceptance of the guilt, our apostasy is removed. And then also in times of distress we can still experience the sense God’s gracious presence. God said to Paul: *My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness* (2 Cor.12:9). As soon as the burden of stress returns something else took place concurrently, and it is no more the chastising hand of God Who turns against us in anger, but then it is *a messenger of Satan to torment me* (2 Cor.12:7).

Thus we see again that God’s favor is with us in every circumstance, even when He places us in the power of enemy forces, in order that the relationship of His grace – the honor of the work He began with us – should be magnified. Therefore in spiritual depressions there is not a passive waiting until God again turns Himself to us, but we should engage in a wrestling in faith, even if the outside pressure continues. For then Jesus is again with us, and in the stress that afflicts us He is not against us but is on our side and enables, even helps us bear the burden. Therefore we must never consider spiritual withdrawal a yoke that we need to tolerate, something we endure, but instead with the battle of faith we must overcome it.

What have we gained then? What does it mean that Jesus is with us again while the burden and pressure from without is not removed, and what have we obtained in this? Naturally the communion of His love and the power to bear the burden mean a great deal, but to what measure are we able to speak of healing in our life when the spiritual depression is removed while the stress and strain remain? The fact of the matter is that we are indeed able to refer to a far-reaching restoration of our life. Also in that sense is Jesus the Savior and Redeemer of our life.

Imagine if our love has been disappointed and disillusioned, but with the love of Jesus we will always be able to love and to respond in love, and in the giving of such love there is always great satisfaction. Imagine also that our sense of beauty was offended somehow; through Jesus’ love there is ever joy and happiness, so that we are able to delight ourselves in the glory of God in all the beautiful things He still gives us. Furthermore imagine that our sense of justice was insulted, but through the love of Jesus we place justice and its victory in the hands of God Who said: *It is Mine to avenge; I will repay* (Rom.12:19). And we could go on in this way.

Even when our life is dejected and depressed due to a chronic illness, the love of Jesus provides wonderful strength in being able to cope with it. Often we have tolerated spiritual depression and withdrawal, and many improper and incorrect things have been spoken and written about it, because we have not been prepared to exhaust the love of Jesus. Over against this the church then needed to put up with sectarianism such as for instance the movement of faith healing through prayer that in spiritual excitement and ecstasy put on display certain forced results. With great realism, but then also in the power of faith, we have to confess that Jesus is Savior in more than one respect already in the present time. The statement of Psalm 103 that God *forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases* must come to us in its full meaning and intent (Ps.103:3-5).

When by faith we come to grips with spiritual depression and withdrawal, it means a struggle as we trust in the Word of God and in the Name of Jesus. Through faith in the Name of Jesus, in God's Word in that Name, Jesus comes to us. When we call on His Name by faith He becomes real to us. In all circumstances there is no other way to have fellowship with Jesus than the way of faith in God's Word.

It is in this way alone that we live with great assurance and in complete realism. We will never be able to speak with certainty and count on the presence of Jesus Himself, except when we by faith place our hand on the Word of God. Without that unconditional trust in God's Word life remains a continual oscillation, and it means trial and error without having complete assurance. What do we really know for certain about Jesus outside of His Word? Then all we have is a strong personal view of Jesus. The danger then is tremendously great that a person will sustain himself with that illusion, and will tend to overcome his inner uncertainty with attempts at excitement and exhilaration. In the church it is too sober and too ordinary for him, and sectarianism has more to satisfy that need for stimulating excitement. Faith in the Word of God lives in great sobriety. By calling on His Name in faith however, Jesus is truly close to us. Thus the Form for the Lord's Supper in bringing faith and fellowship together, teaches us to pray: *We beseech Thee, faithful God and Father that by Thy Holy Spirit this celebration may lead to our daily increase in true faith and fellowship with Christ, Thy beloved Son.*

## **Jesus**

There is a certain disproportion between the second part of the Apostles' Creed when compared with the first and the third parts. In the first part we confess that we believe in God the Father and in the third part in God the Holy Spirit. In line with this and parallel to them we should be confessing that we believe in God the Son, in order that after that we should come to His incarnation. However, the second part begins differently, namely with the Name the Savior received as man. The Creed makes us see Him immediately as man, and presents to us that human life that began in Bethlehem. Only after that comes the confession that He is God's only begotten Son.

This imbalance or disproportion presents the danger that we isolate the work of redemption from that of creation and sanctification. That we return to this for a moment is due to the fact that the impetus for such isolation is found not only in sectarianism, but sadly also in the church. This phenomenon becomes evident when they speak of the "realm of grace" in distinction from the "realm of nature." It would be very difficult in this case to point out the borders of the "realm of grace." This "realm of grace" becomes something abstract – something abstracted from "the natural life." And we cannot live with something in the abstract, for such isolation over the long run leads to the death of all true spiritual life. The saving grace in the Lord Jesus Christ means the restoration of God's original favor and means the redemption and healing, the sanctification of the world once created by God. When we put it this way we have put aside all isolation, and have articulated the connection between the second part, and the third part.

Nevertheless the imbalance we mentioned remains noteworthy. When understood properly it does not lead to the separation or isolation we observed. On the contrary, when we see Jesus we see exactly how God took hold of this real human life. God's grace has in Jesus become flesh. He has become one of us sharing our flesh and blood and has lived among us, and because of this every abstraction of redemption becomes an impossibility. John testifies: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have*

*seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1John 1:1-3).*

That Jesus thus became one of us and shared our flesh and blood also makes the proposition that God's saving grace would not have entered this present life untenable. The same must be said about the view that the realization of grace in life cannot be expected until the future return of Christ, and thus this entire present life will left behind then and set aside for the wholly different life that will come in the future with Christ. The fact is that Jesus shared our flesh and blood and in that flesh and blood He has been the revelation of divine grace, and also demonstrated the restored human life in the present time – restored in the sense of it being sanctified to God even though this life was not at all glorified.

Anyway, it is possible that a person in this present life and in the humiliation still lives in fellowship with God and serves Him daily. Being joined in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ such a life in this time must also be experienced by those who are His. Spiritual life or life by faith is not something abstract, and usually it is much closer than where we tend to look for it – namely it is in every act and in every decision we make. In fact, it is demonstrated and revealed every day in how we live our “natural life.” Grace in Jesus Christ is intended for us in our life and in the present time also to become flesh and blood. If we do not find Jesus in our daily life, we find Him nowhere. That is not a contradiction of what we said above, namely that we must find Jesus through faith in His Name; for through faith in His Name He appears to us and we meet Him every day; through faith in His Name He aids us in every instance and in every decision in life.

The disproportioned beginning of the second part of the Apostles' Creed brings us to Jesus in His humiliation. Jesus is the Name by which His father and mother as well as His relatives called Him. From God's side it was the revelation of the full counsel of redemption; but Jesus was also the name children called Him when He was young, as did adults when He had grown up. When we call Him Jesus we see Him as fully sharing our plight, and we see Him then in the form of a servant. We think of Him as described in the Letter to the Hebrews: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One Who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin* (Hebr.4:15). Also in the suffering and temptations He became one with us.

In starting the second part of the Apostles' Creed with the Name Jesus we see thus the human, the frail-human nature of Jesus placed in the foreground. It was in this way that God appeared to us. He wanted to share fully our human life – our human life depressed with suffering. From His side God has with respect to us shared in our misery, and even entered into the guilt of our sins, and closer than that God cannot come to us. He wanted to break through the separation caused by sin. At the time when we in our misery could no longer draw near to God, He came to us in our plight. He was willing to come within the periphery of our lives closed by sin. Closer than that, He could not approach us. Thus in shared circumstances with us He appeared to us, so that we should receive Him in this way by faith. What could be easier for us than to receive God in His appearance in Jesus Christ? In His exalted, sovereign love He had become a distant God for us, but in His humiliating and suffering love He sought to approach us. And how gratefully we should be prepared to receive Him! Nevertheless, we have loved our seclusion in misery rather than God as He appeared to us in Jesus.

Of course, the reasons for this can also be adduced. Jesus became like unto us, but not in sinfulness. On the contrary, as soon as He comes into contact with us and we with Him, that is, as soon as He enters the sphere of our life He turns something around in us and begins to point out the sins in our life, and our misery as guilt. We cannot truly and fully enter into a relationship with Him without experiencing that reversal. It is on that conversion that our perspective of Jesus depends to a great degree. We observe that with His activities in Israel. In many ways He lived the first thirty years of His life on earth anonymously and incognito, and He appears to be nothing different than one person among others. However, as soon as He begins to reveal the significance of His mission, John the Baptist proclaims: *Look, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29).

There is in that testimony of John an immense accusation against the world that lives in sin, as well as the reality that the world cannot save itself. Moreover, with those words John reveals Him as the fulfillment of the prophecy in the ceremonial services of the Old Covenant. In addition, He is pointed to as the One Who takes away the isolation and separation between humans, and between Jews and Gentiles, for He *takes away the sin of the world*. Also contained in these words is the fact that He comes as Head of the world, as Head of humanity. Because He takes away the sin of the world, He restores again the bond with God.

All of this becomes so much clearer in His further ministry. He presented Himself as an ordinary person, participated in the whole of life with its joys and sorrows; and yet with Him everything was different than with any other human. He sought affinity and fellowship with man, not just temporally and not merely to be something for man; He wanted a fellowship that remains eternally and be all things for man and to lead them into the unfathomed heights of God's grace. All of that was in Jesus the unexpected, the surprising – but also the reason why so many did not want Him and rejected Him. Many did not desire that eternal fellowship and communion that exposes and yet at the same time redeems. Thus it was that many were willing to be healed from their sickness by Him, but then went their own way.

Jesus is *Jesus* for us, and He is with us as we are of ourselves, but He never leaves us as that way – not even for one moment. Thus He meets us in His Word today. He comes to stand right next to us, yet as soon as we see Him there and recognize Him, He leads us to unknown heights. And with Jesus we cannot remain by ourselves alone in our sin and misery not even for one moment. That is the marvelous experience that always takes place when we meet Jesus. It is the kind of encounter that we must not ever forget; not when He enters our life, nor when He enriches us as He takes us along. Every time we find ourselves deep in misery, we need by faith to be conscious that Jesus comes to us then also, so we may experience that He does not leave us alone in that misery.

It is in this way that we need to preach Christ. And it would be a shortcoming in preaching – we include here all preaching, but especially in evangelism – in the sense that we do not say enough about how Jesus has entered and continues to be present in all our misery. But the sermon can also fail to do justice in not stressing enough how Jesus in and through His fellowship changed our life and rescued us. However, we must be careful not merely to say that Jesus is friendly and compassionate in a human way, for we must speak of God's love in Jesus, and that this perfect Godly love does not leave us to ourselves in any respect, but through confession of our guilt removes our misery. Therefore, to preach Jesus as the complete Savior is something different than to present Him as being only filled with mercy and willingness to help. For His mercy is fundamentally different than any other kind of mercy there may be in the world. We are no longer our own when we belong to Jesus and from that same moment on we belong with all that we are to God, and with that we also know our guilt.

Is it not here that we find the reason why we do not want Jesus? Our soul often sighs because of loneliness, and we intensely yearn for someone to share our life; yet we do not allow Jesus entrance to our lives. We realize that as soon as we let Him in we relinquish control and leadership to Him. Human love can accomplish something in this respect, but mostly we reserve a certain part of our life where we do not allow that love to penetrate with the result that even when we accept a particular love, we remain ourselves. Therefore we have no trouble accepting human love, even though we do that less than we think.

The love of Jesus penetrates and enters every hiding place of our heart and conquers everything. In fact this total, absolute love is too overpowering and takes over too much in us, and leaves too little for oneself that we should allow it into our self-defined sphere. Only faith that places full confidence in that love opens the circle. And that is what the coming of Jesus into our life seems to be in the circle of our life; for actually it is a being taken into the wider sphere of His life. Such fellowship or communion originates with Him and embraces all of His people with whom we become one. We cannot really say that the sphere of our life coincides with that of Jesus and His people, nor is our personal life absorbed in communal life. But there is a power in the love of Jesus that gives fellowship to all the lives of believers with Jesus Himself, and with each other because that love controls all of them. And that means the redemption of their lives.

### ***The Savior***

The Name Jesus means Savior. The angel of the Lord said to Joseph in a dream: *She will give birth to a son and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins* (Matt.1:21).

We have become used to the translation *Savior* and *to save*. There is some danger among us that both *Savior* as well as *salvation* are drawn too much into the realm of the emotions so that we think then of being saved and of salvation as an overwhelming mood of happiness. Moreover, we tend to think of “salvation” often exclusively as something that happens after this life. We have arrived at this by the use of those words, and yet that meaning is not actually present in

the words *Savior* or *salvation*. Saved means intact or unblemished. With “saving” or “to save” one ought to think of a complete restoration of our life. That extends far beyond the restrictions of our emotions, and also this is not a mere future happening, the restoration begins already now. Such understanding speaks to us more directly and immediately with the designation *Redeemer*.

In the Old Testament there are several types of Jesus who had the name Jesus or Joshua, with the most commonly mentioned being Joshua the son of Nun who succeeded Moses, and Joshua the high priest who with Zerubbabel led the first expedition out of Babylon. Both Joshuas led Israel to Canaan, and the saving nature of their action was to lead the people out of the foreign land into the land of promise, where God wanted to live in the midst of His people and give them His blessing as was also evident in the fruitfulness of the land. In that action both Joshuas were typical of Jesus leading His people out of captivity into the promised land. However, we should see that distinctively typical quality properly. Jesus leads us out of the alienation of the dispersion caused by sin, that is, the separation from God and from each other into the communion and fellowship with Him and with each other under the dominion of His grace in His Kingdom. The Canaan into which Israel was led is thus not only typical of the future heavenly bliss, but also of the Kingdom of God even as this already in our time in principle is being realized.

The angel emphasizes the fact that Jesus will save His people *from their sin*. We have explained especially in Lord’s Day 2 that Jesus turns the sense of need and misery around, and makes us see the misery as guilt. He wants to deliver us from the guilt of sin and through this also from its power and all the consequences of sin. What primarily determines our misery is that we are bound under the curse, and in the first place Jesus wants to deliver us from this through the atonement by His blood. If we do not see this, Jesus has not redeemed. Humanly speaking, there is so much misery where the hand of Jesus does not reach, because people will not accept nor recognize their guilt in that misery. We must never forget in this that Jesus also makes us see such misery as guilt, and that this needs to take place first.

Yet the reality is that sinful flesh often refuses to recognize its misery as guilt. And it is for that reason that there are so many ideals and expectations about Jesus that are totally wrong. Some people want to make use of Jesus for a variety of purposes, and almost every movement among humans has sought to appropriate Jesus for its own purposes. Over against this comes the true revelation of Jesus as Scripture brings that to us, and especially through this word of the angel. When we come to Jesus we always have to deal with the guilt of sin about which He instructs us further, for then we do not know anything except Jesus and Him crucified.

Because He delivers us from the guilt of sin through the way of faith in His Name, He also breaks down the power of sin in us. A believing communion and fellowship with Jesus’ love also means the power and control of that love in our lives, and it is in this way that sin in principle loses its control over us. And what a tremendous blessing that is in our lives! For in principle it gives us back authority in the Name of Jesus, since in the Kingdom of God we shall again rule with Jesus and in the Name of Jesus rule over all the works of God’s hands once more. It will be a glorious life – a life in which we are ‘masters’ again. All of us have sinned and defiled the glory of God, but that glory being expressed in having dominion is being restored in us by Jesus. This renewal has its consequences for all our relationships, also for our physical life. The salvation Jesus gives us is not just something abstractly personal, and does not only concern the future, but it means a beginning restoration or renewal of life in all its relationships already in this present time. But it must not become just a slogan or a catchphrase for us. In fact, that renewal functions in us by the power of God’s love in Jesus, and for which love through faith in His Name our very life was opened. Thus, already here and now the Kingdom of God is present in principle.

The angel in speaking with Joseph indicates that the salvation Jesus brings us does not lead to an abstract personal existence when he says that *you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins* (Matt.1:21). The redemption of Jesus denotes the renewal of the fellowship of an entire people, and that of all kinds of fellowship among those people, namely, church fellowship, family and relatives, society, and even national life. Those people in the New Testament would indeed be gathered out of all the nations of the world, but they do not form one nation or one state. In fact, every fellowship in that nation would prosper through Jesus. And those people as a whole will come to know the fellowship through faith and under the rule of God’s love in Jesus.

Of course the restoration of fellowship does not diminish the value of one’s personal life. Instead, a person’s life has received much greater value in the fellowship through the function that it has to fulfill in the whole body . The Name

Jesus places greater emphasis on our personal life and makes it stand out. There is a special place in Jesus' heart for everyone who belongs to Him and for each of us there is our own relationship with Him. Everyone however receives the full measure of divine love in Jesus, and that fact eliminates the isolation of individual existence, and produces the unity of fellowship in Him. If with the Name of Jesus we were to think one-sidedly of our personal life only, we would go against God's Word by means of the angel that He would save *His people* from their sins.

Personal life can be emphasized and stressed to the degree of being detrimental to the fellowship of the community, and then it becomes the means by which one tries to exploit the love of Jesus for oneself. In reality there is quite a bit of such individualism even in the wholesome life of the church, and it is difficult to combat it also within ourselves. This is true especially when we experience some sort of depression, and we tend to insist then that our personal life also has its rights! In such a mood we would almost be ready, if necessary, to forgo the welfare of the congregation as long as we personally are nurtured. It is especially sorrow and depression that can make us so egoistical. In a case like that the preaching has to satisfy our egocentric life, and yet the insatiable hunger of such selfishness can never really be satisfied.

There are people who cannot escape this dilemma during their whole life, with the result that they absolutely reject preaching of any other kind. In such a circumstance the love of Jesus benefits them very little, for that love never caters to such egoism. In the fellowship with Jesus there is always something stimulating, and His love motivates us to new activity. There is something wonderful in the fact that when we in some fashion have come to the end of our resistance, Jesus' love not only personally comforts and refreshes us, but we receive healing as He calls us to a new task.

Thus when Elijah having come to the end of his strength flees into the wilderness, God does give him provisions in a miraculous manner, but immediately adds the words: *Get up and eat for the journey is too much for you* (1 Kings 19:7). It seems that a new assignment was at hand that entailed going to Mount Horeb. When preaching on this we could stop with the bread and water provided in the wilderness, but then we would have deprived that historical account of its true meaning, and the sermon would not accomplish its objective. We are being healed when God's love in Jesus calls us anew, and in that call we immediately experience the fellowship with God's people, for that call is for the service of His people and comes to us in the fellowship of those people. Elijah thought in his depressed egoistic condition that he was the only prophet left in the LORD'S service, but the words of God's love revealed to him: *yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all who have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him* (1 Kings 19:18).

### ***The Complete Savior***

In the second answer this dilemma is postulated: *either Jesus is not a complete Savior, or those who by true faith accept this Savior must find in Him all that is necessary for their salvation*. The fact is that there are many ways in which people have attempted to divide life. They have looked in part for salvation to Jesus, and they also trusted in something else.

In the Roman Catholic churches saints are placed next to Jesus. In Protestant churches such honoring of saints is also present, perhaps in idolizing pious people and in particular then a devout father or a virtuous mother. As soon as the faith life that trusts exclusively in God is even a little beyond its peak, the veneration of saints is found also in the Reformed community. Those spiritual or godly examples then provide as it were props on which people lean and depend. Even the "the saints" from Scripture are then viewed in this way. Thus in such a case when talking about the God-fearing David or the faithful Elijah there could then also be a searching for support.

When we reject that, it does not reflect a denial of the givens of Scripture, namely that it *is useful for teaching...and training in righteousness* (2 Tim.3:16). But one asks: What precisely is the teaching of Scripture in this matter? It is that in focusing on the personal piety of the saints of Scripture we could use this inappropriately as a crutch for our own faith. If on the other hand we see all that they have as a response to what God in Christ meant to them, we are pointed to God by their entire lives. Surely no one can deny the significance in our lives of parents who fear the Lord, for with this the importance of fellowship in God's covenant immediately becomes evident – a fellowship that also exists with all the saints in Scripture. The life of such parents also enabled us to see on a continuing basis more fully God in His faithfulness. However, the life of a God fearing father or a devout mother can also be viewed in such a way that God's grace is diminished for us, and thus hinders the actual revealing of it clearly. The benefit of looking at those saints should

be that God is the same for us that He was for the former generations in His covenant. Then no supporting comfort is needed besides the love of God in Jesus.

Also those with an Arminian or nomistic perspective experience a searching for a support in addition to God's love in Jesus. They do maintain and teach that Jesus has opened the way to salvation by having atoned for our sins with His blood, but that the decision of whether in faith we will chose Him is dependent on our free will. In this way then they deny the complete depravity of our heart, and also deny that our salvation in the first place is a deed of God alone. Thus they teach a gospel with the call to faith as a new law or *nomos* – thus the word nomistic – which we in our own strength would be able to obey. In this way there is then in addition to God's love in Jesus another source of support within ourselves, namely, our free will. Then God is not the only One in our redemption.

The catechism declares such a division of life when we in addition and next to God, look for another source of strength as impossible: *No. Though they boast of Him in words, they in fact deny the only Savior Jesus.* All such dividing of life is fabrication. Theoretically speaking, one could proceed in this way, and think that our salvation is due partly to Jesus and partly to the saints, or in part to Jesus and in part to ourselves, but no one can actually experience salvation in this way. For we rest either completely in God, or we find comfort in something else namely ourselves. To put it differently: Jesus is our all, or He means nothing!

Our Lord's Day is very pointed in its expression here. For a while we could perhaps camouflage from ourselves the fact that Jesus means nothing to us by talking a lot about Him; yet in doing so we develop our own concept of Jesus and then we do not have the Savior as He is revealed to us in His Word. After all, the love of Jesus is as absolute as it is crucial, so that over against it only one single response is possible, namely that of complete surrender to it by faith; and even that faith itself has to be a work of His love. In fact it is only Jesus Who can permeate our vision; and if such is not the case, He means nothing to us. We cannot say it categorically enough in keeping with the catechism. Our heart is focused on Jesus alone, or on something else, for it cannot be directed at both at the same time. We note, however, that the criterion of our heart changes easily at times, with the result that while we are still believers in the sense that we are known by God – for the bond of fellowship is not dissolved from God's side – but the action of believing disappears no matter how much we still talk about Him.

With gratitude we realize that the relationship with Jesus is not limited to a continually conscious believing in Him, for even if this should be deficient we would still be bound to God, since the work of the Spirit in us does remain constant. And because of this, we have a changed outlook. Moreover, we must not deny the continuing fruit of the Spirit's work in us unless in seeking to oppose nomism, which is religious conduct based on law, we would in due time end up in anti-nomism that sees fellowship with God materialize but for a moment or so when we would be able to see God. Thus anti-nomism denies God's continuing and constant work in us. And yet in the rejection of anti-nomism we must not deny that there is only fellowship with Jesus through a conscious faith. We experience that our conscious faith sometimes is held back in certain situations and at times even is pushed back entirely. However, in that faith itself the heart cannot be divided for such faith is only able to belong to Jesus and cannot at the same time trust in something else. For our faith Jesus is everything, and if that faith is absent there is no fellowship with Him, however much He from His side holds on to us.

That Jesus is everything for us, and that through faith we can see that our entire salvation exists only in Him, and that therefore also the fact that faith itself is the result of His work in us, hinges for us on God's Word through the angel, that He will save *His people* from their sins. According to those words Jesus came for His people, and not for each and every human being. He came for His own, that is, for those whom the Father had given Him – the elect of God. Although one cannot prove this truth from the few words of the angel, it is expressed in various places in Scripture, and the words of the angel need to be understood in the light of these other places.

When God's election according to His sovereign good pleasure is behind our salvation, then everything that leads to our salvation must also go out from God, also our faith. That does not take away, however, that the elect also are gathered by God by means of preaching the gospel to all nations, that is, in the way of the historical revelation of God's covenant. Therefore the Name of Jesus must be preached, for *salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other Name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 12****31. Why is He called Christ, that is, Anointed?**

*Because He has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption; our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us, and who continually intercedes for us before the Father; and our eternal King, who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.*

**32. Why are you called a Christian?**

*Because I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing, so that I may as prophet confess His Name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.*

**Believing in His Name**

In this Lord's Day we focus on the anointing of life, namely the anointing of life by Christ and by believers. And in addressing that anointing we need to touch on a variety of areas. In a preliminary way we must observe first that this means a dedication or consecration of life to the Lord. Life has been desecrated and defiled by sin, and with the anointing of the Holy Spirit it again becomes consecrated to God.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the catechism speaks about this anointing in connection with the Name of Christ and with the name of Christian. Also in this Lord's Day we come across the noteworthy significance of the name, and what is meant is the name as given in Scripture. Of course this does not only apply to the Name Christ, but also to the name Christian. In Acts 11:26 we are told specifically that *the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch*. And with this information Scripture designates that name as appropriate and accurate and of importance for believers. Thus in the Name *Christ* the Anointed One is revealed, and in the name *Christian* the believers become known publicly. Micah already prophesied: *Wisdom shall see Your name* (Micah 6:9 NKJ).

A person's nature or essence also becomes known through the name, for that name as given in Scripture is of course God's revelation for us. And His revelation governs and directs the life of Christ as well as the life of believers. The fact is not that Jesus the Christ came to this earth and therefore was named Christ, for long before that God named the Christ. And that Word of God contained a promise that must be fulfilled, including the appearance of Jesus as the Christ, since all these events were predestined to take place in this way. It is the same with the name Christian, even though this happened only afterward. But that the believers would share in the anointing of Christ had already been revealed from the beginning, since this was contained in the Mother promise. And therefore it needed to happen.

Thus faith has to deal with the name, that is, with God's Word in that name. Faith always is related to and entails the Word and therefore faith is certain. We do not just experience Jesus as the Christ and consequently designate Him that way. On the contrary, we believe the Word of God, which calls Him Christ and therefore we also experience something of Him as the Christ. In fact, we always have to involve God's Word as the first and final foundation of our faith. And faith does not rest on experience, for experience can only be the fruit of faith. We do not on our own call ourselves Christians having the anointing of Christ, but instead we are called Christians by God in His Word, and by faith we claim that name however little we may actually have the experience of being such.

When we truly know ourselves as Christians, it is a knowledge that is not in the first place based on experience but on a knowledge by faith in God's Word. There really is not a genuine Christian life – an anointed life – except through faith in God's Word. The promise given in the name becomes fulfilled by means of the way of faith. On the basis of God's Word we believe that we are Christians, and we believe that even in spite of our life's experiences. In fact, only by way of a faith that persists to the end do we experience something of the reality of that anointing – even more than we ourselves are able to discern of it.

Faith in the Name *Christ* and faith in the name *Christian* do not exist independently of each other. Whereas our faith involves God's revelation concerning Christ, we discover to our surprise that God at the same time said something about us. It is a forlorn undertaking if we should want to know something about ourselves, if we were not first of all to fix our eyes on Christ. We are often so busy with ourselves and our self-interests that we pay no attention to the Christ. And yet in this way we never come to know the truth, for Scripture speaks about us only in the context of Christ. It does so in this way: *Those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers* (Rom.8:29), and also: *Father, I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory You have given Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world* (John 17:24). Outside of Christ we know nothing about ourselves, and we cannot believe what God disclosed about us except in the light of His revelation concerning the Christ.

That does not mean however that we do not believe anything at all about ourselves. That in fact would contradict the second answer of this Lord's Day as well as being contrary to Scripture. The question might nevertheless confront us of what we really mean to God. And if such a question should disturb us deeply, it certainly would become evident that we were trying to understand ourselves outside of the Christ. In such an instance we need to return to focusing our eyes on Christ, and in connection with God's revelation of Christ we again would be able to grasp God's revelation of us.

It is in this way that through faith in the name – meaning faith in God's Word – we are able to exist in this world. In any other way we would never be able to prevail, for faith praises God in spite of the appearance of things. After all, the question sometimes nags at us concerning which powers in this world are supreme: those that divide, repress, and destroy, or those that restore, regenerate, and build up? If we should consider only the appearance of matters, we are often inclined to accept that the forces of evil are victorious. In such a scenario then we would expect disaster to overtake us in the end. For us then life would be only an existence until death comes; that is, things are built up in order to be torn down. The question even arises if in fact there really are regenerative forces. This is true especially if we understand that only in a life devoted to God there is regeneration and restoration. And now the question becomes all the more oppressive for us.

In fact, what we see is a pervasive desecration of life in our time. And with that stifling, almost debilitating doubt that assails us, we need to cling to faith in God's revelation of Christ and with this of ourselves, in order to remain faithful. We ask the question: what is evident in this world of the anointing of Christ and of the anointing of life in Him? We do believe in the anointing of Christ and thus we live this life always in expectation. For us the end cannot be annihilation.

And thus we ask again what is evident of the church's anointing. She does not seem to be the gathering of those devoted to God, as it appears to us; for that there is too much desecration through sin. Nevertheless we do believe in the anointing of the church, and therefore we always have expectations for her. The power of Christ's anointing will be seen in her sometime, and she will prove to have been the light of the world and the salt of the earth. However, for us this is in the first and last place a matter of faith in the name that God has given. And the Word of God does not and cannot deceive.

### ***The Ordination***

What has been said here about the name, that is about the Word of God, refers back to God's counsel. All these things must happen in this way because they have been promised to us in God's Word; yet behind that Word is the counsel of God. He speaks first – He promises – and then it comes to be, for He fulfils the promise since He determined all things in His counsel. We are reminded of this when the catechism states that behind the anointing there is God's ordination. We confess that *Christ has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit*. Thus in His eternal counsel

God ordained Jesus as the Christ and designated Him as the Christ. And what is confessed about Christ's anointing must then also apply to the anointing of the believers. They have been ordained as Christians from eternity.

In that ordination the sovereign omnipotence of God's decisions becomes evident. No one has known about God's mind. Scripture reveals: *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?* (Rom.11:33-35). God's decrees have been made by Him alone no matter what we might conceive or produce. In fact, whatever happens in the world is the result of that divine eternal decision.

Ordination always indicates election, and it always consists of a decision concerning each of His own children personally. We note that Jesus Christ also was the object of divine election. Of course He was not chosen unto salvation like a sinful human, one of many. And yet He was chosen as Head of His own, the church: *He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake* (1 Pet.1:20). Moreover, we are the elect in Him as the Apostle Paul writes: *For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight* (Eph 1:4). And thus believers are chosen to be Christians – an election that is personal. Furthermore, in ordination a task or calling is entailed for that elect person only, in distinction from the calling of all others. Thus, the personal significance of every believer is determined and anchored in that ordination.

The potency of that election becomes evident in life. And by means of it God shapes us, equipping and directing us to that which He decided in His ordination, which becomes thus the driving force of our life. For the believer it is quite clear that life cannot be explained from the natural factors that are present, but rather finds its *raison d'être* in God's ordination. Moreover, even those natural factors have been determined by the ordination. A question that continues to divide the world is whether life should be explained on the basis of what it consists of or because of God's calling. It can be phrased this way: is it possible that life can be defined and explicated with the resources humans have available to them, or is there a higher power whose capabilities and actions we cannot calculate nor predict ahead of time? We believe in divine ordination, and for us that answers the question.

All of this does not only apply to us, but also to Christ so that His life was governed by divine election. Thus He testified about Himself: *Did not the Christ have to suffer these things, and then enter His glory?* (Luke 24:26). It had to be this way according to God's ordination. We think of Him with respect to that especially as a man, and observe how ordination functions in His life as a human. We see Him also as a man carrying out His office. In fact, this entire first answer makes us think of Him as a human. When we think of our calling we are apt to think of a person called to this by God. In this instance as well it is impossible to separate in Christ the human from the divine. The Son has taken upon Himself the eternal Word in order to establish God's fellowship with humans. And in that capacity He became Creator of the world, and in the same capacity He also became the world's Redeemer.

The Son of God took upon Himself all of this work relating to God's eternal counsel willingly, because this had once been decided and thus carrying it out was His calling. The three Persons of God entered into a voluntary covenant, and in it the Son placed Himself at the service of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus Scripture is able to say of the Son as the eternal Wisdom: *The LORD brought Me forth as the first of His works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began* (Prov. 8:22,23). The words *brought Me forth* intend to indicate "ordained to" or "destined for." The assignment given to the Son was specific: He would give the world God's fellowship and communion, and in connection with this He became the world's Creator and its Redeemer.

We note that all of this pertains to Him as God; and we are incorrect when speaking about His calling and appointment while limiting these to the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. Behind His office that He fulfilled as man was the mandate that He as God in God's eternal counsel took upon Himself, and His service in His office, or His official service, is directly related to that mandate. Of course His office belonged to the sphere of the human. Yet the peculiar thing of the office is that the mandate must be fulfilled in the once created world. The fact is that the office presumes the world and has in it a specific task, but creation itself does not belong to that office.

Thus we function in the human sphere when we are discussing the subject of the office, for as a human Jesus Christ is Prophet, Priest, and King. However, we must not overlook the reality that behind the human carrying out of the office there is the mandate that He as God from eternity had taken upon Himself. It is only in this way that we are able to

understand how His work as Officebearer presumed the creation of the world (it was after all an official service in the now existing world) and how that task took in the entire world, and how it must lead to the redemption of the whole world. But just as we must see the unity of the divine and the human in Christ, we need to accept the oneness of the mandate that was His as the eternal Word and His human performance in His office. Both of these were determined in His ordination. All these matters governed His life on earth and still do so in all His actions.

However, that does not take away that when we deal with His ordination to the office we see Him primarily as human. In this way He is the subject of God's election, namely as Head of those who are His own. Moreover, it was that election that determined His entirely unique calling on earth. In a different sense this can also be said of all the believers, for in their election every one of them has a wholly unique calling as well, one that cannot be fulfilled by anyone else. For election is thoroughly personal, and for each of those chosen it includes their own calling and circumstances. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they are not also chosen as a community and for that fellowship. The personal calling of believers is a calling they are to fulfill in and for that fellowship, and thus also for God. Only in the fellowship of believers does the personal attain its full intent. It is in this way then that personal election and election as community do not exclude each other, but include one another.

We confess that Christ is chosen as Head of His own, and thus His election included all those who are His. Already in the election the Head was not without the body, and thus Scripture says that *He chose us in him before the creation of the world* (Eph.1:4). On this basis too the second answer states: *Because I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing*. The fact is that it is only as a member of Christ that I share in that anointing, and in the words of the catechism Christ and those who belong to Him are seen as a unity. And if indeed behind that anointing is the ordination, then already in that ordination God must have viewed Christ and those who are His as a unity.

What we have noted so far already points to the answer of the question of how we become consciously aware of our ordination to office. Even in answering this question we find ourselves often considering the matter apart from Christ, with the focus on ourselves, leading to individualistic and subjective doubts and indecision. What we need to see is Christ in His ordination to office, for with that insight our ordination to office will also become clear. Thus by faith we focus on the fact that according to God's Word the ordination of Christ involved our own also from eternity. It is then that especially the calling, which comes as the office, becomes ours. For the fact that we were ordained with Christ, places us before the mandate and calling to fulfill the office as He did. Then, whenever we look at Christ, by faith we always are confident that we do have the office even when we see yet very little of an actual obedience in this area within ourselves. And that faith that will not let go of the official calling and knows that every day there is a renewed obligation to comply with the office.

The eternal ordination, by means of which we then by faith come to be in Christ, does not mean the suspension of our responsibility. On the contrary, it leads us to the realization of that responsibility; that is, how can we fulfill our calling contained in the ordination to the office? Earlier we considered the ordination of Christ and of us as a sovereign deed of God and as the driving force of the history of the world. However, the outworking of that ordination does not take place automatically; instead we must take hold of that ordination by faith and thus participate in the action to have it come to its fulfillment.

### ***The Dedication***

Following the words *He has been ordained by God the Father* is the clause *and anointed with the Holy Spirit*. Almost immediately we think of Him being qualified for His office by the Holy Spirit. However, before that we need to consider a separate element in that anointing, namely the appointing, the setting apart, the consecration or dedication. The anointed one by his anointing was appointed and dedicated as office bearer, and separated for the office that was consecrated to God. This becomes very evident, for example, in the anointing of David who was anointed long before he actually assumed the office. It is in this way also that we read in Psalm 133 about the oil with which Aaron was sanctified and dedicated to God. In a word then we can speak of the sanctification for the office, that is the dedication to God.

Thus the anointing takes possession and control of the person involved. This element needs to be considered separately, since otherwise the questions of whether one is actually called to the office, and whether one will be equal to and qualified for that office will dominate our thinking. And then we begin to look too much at ourselves and faith will not mature, resulting in a life of apprehension. Faith is enlivened by the calling and at the same time embraces the promise. In the very first place we must come under the controlling influence of the call to the office.

Therefore, (how could it be different?) we become consciously aware of the fellowship of the community in which we have been called to the office. The church of the Lord has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to the office. This took place when in communion with her Head in heaven the Holy Spirit was poured out on her. We take note of the fact that during the Old Testament period there was not a general priesthood of believers, but only a single family was called to the priesthood. In that time not everyone was yet a prophet, and not all were kings. The anointing of all believers to the office took place at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And this was connected with the ascension of Jesus Christ to God's right hand. Of course, even during His humiliation He was already Officebearer and had already then received the Holy Spirit through Whom He did all things. However, by His obedience in our place during the days of His humiliation He still needed to prove worthy of the office. The honor and glory of the office came only with His exaltation, and of course then He needed to share the Holy Spirit He had received with those who were His. Through that Spirit the church was anointed to be an assembly of office bearers.

We need to start from the anointing of the church with the Holy Spirit in fellowship with her Head, and with it first consider the calling, that is, the responsibility the Holy Spirit places on us through that anointing. When we speak about the work of the Holy Spirit we often think of the gifts and abilities He gives us. But we must not forget that the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, meaning that He directs us to God so that we become devoted to Him. Only in the way of sanctification does He grant us His gifts and powers. From the very beginning the Holy Spirit, Who consecrates the church in fellowship with her Head, has laid His claim to us her children. And through baptism this claim comes to expression.

Through that anointing with the Holy Spirit we believe and thus it becomes a reality for us; and in this way we will also receive the gifts and powers for the dedication of our lives to the Lord. In fellowship with all of God's people and their Head we are anointed to be prophets, priests, and kings. That is the calling in which we are to believe. For faith, the calling comes first! We are anointed by God to be office bearers, and in no other way than by faith are we to devote ourselves to that office. All the confidence of faith is found particularly in the claim the Holy Spirit placed upon us in the calling. And thus we always need to proceed from what God has done. In that way we become office bearers, and therefore we begin every morning with being called to the office.

Our whole life then becomes involved in that dedication. We are not just natural and ordinary people, and in addition to that we have yet here and there an official calling, because in everything we are nothing other than God's office bearers. Our calling of the office means that we are citizens of God's kingdom, and that kingdom is not limited to merely a few duties and tasks in our lives. All our activities, including those referred to as secular and profane, must be devoted to the Lord and thus are also kingdom work, or official activities. We are on this world for no other purpose than to be God's office bearers; and no matter what we are doing, our relationships in society, in marriage, in families, and even our hobbies and recreation, all of it is official service to God – or at least it ought to be that.

We add that this does not remove any of the fascinating appeal of life. Somehow one of the qualms some people have is that when I have to see everything, even the pleasures of life in light of the dedication to the office, enjoyment of life becomes impossible. In such a case the joy in life becomes limited and curtailed by the demand flowing from that commitment. In fact, an official life, one of office-bearing before God, is seen by many as devitalizing. And indeed, much in life is circumscribed by the demand to sanctification, namely the freedom that we think to possess in order to live as we wish. To be more specific: the freedom of idealism that devises its own ideal is thereby cut off. For idealism fantasizes and creates for itself objectives, and considers the pursuit of them as the calling in life. In this way idealism seeks to escape the purpose and norm that God has appointed.

Ideals that have been created by us and for us are impossible to realize and always end up in disappointment. Even romanticism that dreams away the boundaries God has set, are cut off by the calling to be office bearers, for such romanticism is basically nothing else than an overindulgence and excess rather than wholesome living. And whoever

believes that all of life as the achievement and fulfillment of the office is basically a complete demeaning or devitalization of it, has forgotten or never understood that we are called to the office by the love of God and the Spirit Who sanctifies us – the Spirit of God’s love. In carrying out the office that the love of God bestowed on us, pleasures await that will truly astound us in life. When seen in this way, the calling to the office of believer cannot be against pleasure and enjoyment, for that love has also created life with its abundance. Happiness in life is only then experienced in its intensity when in it we are dedicated to the Lord. For then the enjoyment of life becomes a calling as we read this in the book of Ecclesiastes.

When therefore the calling to office involves our entire life, our church life is not lived alongside of and separate from our life outside of it, but is in complete harmony with it, thus renouncing the division of life as sacred and secular. And vice versa, with having our whole life in service to the Lord necessarily includes fulfilling the office in the church. When we are weak in church life, it demonstrates that outside of it we also do not live the life of an obedient office bearer, for those who devote themselves fully to the Lord in life, understand their calling inside and outside of the church.

In having been devotedly obedient to His Father, the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled His calling with respect to the temple service. And in doing so, the enjoyment or satisfaction of life was therein not denied to Him. If we in Him and with Him are dedicated to God as office bearers, then our lives may not be different than His.

### ***The Enabling***

After the ordination and dedication, with the anointing we need to distinguish as a third element the enabling. We read of this with Saul and with David. When they were anointed the Holy Spirit began to stimulate them (1 Sam.10:9, 1 Sam.16:13). Immediately following the story of the Lord Jesus Christ’s anointing with the Holy Spirit we read that *Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil* (Matt.4:1-11). The Spirit of God qualified Him to withstand the devil and also enabled Him for all His work. In addition, Scripture also relates that Christ *through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God* (Hebr.9:14).

With enabling we should not primarily think of the giving of all kinds of gifts and powers, for our natural endowment with its gifts and powers is already given to us at birth. Of course, also that birth is a work of the Spirit and that disposition or personality a gift of the Spirit. We need to keep this in mind after the anointing, for the anointing means an enabling of the gifts and the powers granted, and thus bringing life to fruition. There are many more gifts and powers than those that become evident. For what is lacking, it appears, is the anointing of life.

We should not be concerned that we, at least so we think, have received so few gifts. But we are responsible that the gifts we received through the anointing of the Spirit come to full development. The fact is that God has not given us a different calling. Of course we can pray for receiving such gifts as are needed to perform the work of the office. Nevertheless, with the granting of those gifts is not meant that we receive something new in addition to what we already possess, but rather a development of the gifts already given so that we are qualified to carry out the office. Thus, when today people seem to reach their true spiritual worth so infrequently, it is not that they have fewer gifts than an earlier generation, but rather that there is a paucity of the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

With the anointing, in the sense of the enabling qualification of Christ, we think especially of what happened after His baptism. Behind this however we should keep in mind that He as a human was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And with that conception He was provided with those gifts that would become necessary for functioning in His office, and then His life was made productive by the anointing of the Spirit. In Him nothing of what had been given remained hidden or inoperative. His life in humiliation was yet a life in full bloom, an outstandingly good life precisely because in everything it was devoted to God. We must not forget that the central endowment that blossomed with this anointing was the gift of love. Through that love the fire in His entire life was enkindled. The life of the Lord Jesus Christ was beautiful through its love; and therefore it remained marvelous even as gave Himself over to death. By His love for God all the gifts in Him have also become revealed and are evident.

Thus we note His conception by the Holy Spirit, but especially observe His anointing after His baptism. In addition to this we can add yet a third element, namely His ascension into heaven and being seated at God’s right hand. At that time

His life was crowned with victory, and the work of the Spirit in Him was no longer hindered by outside pressure; and it was then that He could pour out the Holy Spirit also on His own.

As it was with Christ so also with us there are three discernible events in life: our disposition is also molded by the Holy Spirit; in addition the Spirit does not merely regenerate us, but also makes our gifts flourish by His anointing; and finally there will be for us the victory of life through the Spirit. With our anointing by the Holy Spirit we think especially of developing all our talents fully to their intended use, and thus being our enabling for the fulfilling of the divine office.

We should long for that blossoming of our life and we have a duty to work at this steadfastly. Our qualifying does not happen mechanically. There are so many prayers for gifts and talents that are ineffectual, for we must live by faith using the attributes God has given us. Thus it is faith that from the beginning accepts the calling, and realizes the dedication to the Lord. And it is also faith that at the same time embraces the promise of qualification. We observe that sometimes we may have a great longing to be qualified, yet at the same time have a weak sense of calling. It appears then that we may have a desire to be equipped for a task chosen by ourselves and for a purpose we have selected. In that setting the prayer for enabling may not be answered. We receive what we need by way of a faithful dedicating ourselves to the consecration of the office. In the measure our faith in the calling is strong, to that measure it can also expect to receive it.

With this we must not forget that just as in Christ we were consecrated to the office, and through faith in Him become conscious of it, so also in Christ we will be blessed in carrying out the office and by faith in Him will receive the qualification for it. And by faith we receive all we need: *From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another* (John 1:16).

It is in this way that the life of believers becomes beautiful, for also in them love as the most important gift has begun to flourish. Thus, believing in the consecration to office is not something that inhibits us but something that sets the love of the heart free. Surrendering by faith to that dedication is a surrender of the heart, and does not diminish life but rather in it love flourishes, and only love kindles all our other gifts and abilities. The love of the office enables them to develop. This is not dependent on our mental ability, social standing, or prosperity, for the life of the simplest believer at times can be delightful. We are amazed at what God can still do with a human life! In the life of most the anointing with the Holy Spirit is apparent. And of course the time comes when believers receive the victory of the life they lived by the Spirit.

We pointed out in the above that we experience our ordination as well as our consecration and qualification in Christ. It is significant that also in this Lord's Day confession is made of the believers' anointing. Yet that anointing can never be seen outside of the context of Christ's anointing. We need to be on guard against focusing too much attention on ourselves, for the solution to all of life's problems and needs is found only by looking to Christ. On the other hand, we can never see Christ as the Anointed One unless at the same time we see our own anointing in that light.

### ***Christ's Office and Ours***

It cannot be denied that the concept of office is not strong, even among believers. These following two matters generally function conjointly: the perspective of Christ's official work and the understanding of our own office bearing. We tend to consider Christ in the way we see ourselves as long as the truth of God's Word does not take control of us. When our spiritual life is entirely free, unattached, and spontaneous, not bound by any duty or norm, and not subject to function or office, we will also only see in Christ the unrestricted love in which He gave Himself, and we will never understand His life as the undertaking of His assigned office.

What stands out then for instance with His suffering and dying, with the sacrifice He brought, is only the so-called ethical factor, namely that He gave Himself in free love for us to the very depth of death in order there to seize our hand. But then the death of Christ is not viewed as the fulfillment of a mandate, not as a so-called juridical task, and not as the atoning of the guilt of the world. Generally speaking the view of Christ's work as His office is not widely held, and in connection with this the same is true of how of our own life as office bearing is seen.

In approaching this matter, we must not from our side first seek to improve how we need to see our own life in the office, in order that subsequently we may have a truer understanding of the life of Christ. Rather, the revelation of Scripture

about the life of Christ makes us know Him as Officebearer, and as a result of that our own life must come into view properly. Thus it is so amazing that in Reformed circles where they normally speak of Christ's office, it seems so difficult to realize and accept our own call to office. Was there then really a true concept of the office of Christ, that is, a confession of that office by faith?

Of course there are powerfully deterring factors, namely that due to sin we have lost the office and the concept of it. Through sin the consecration of life is gone. That devotion and dedication is dependent on the office and on the obedience in the office, and when that is absent and missing, any number of dedication services will not help. It is noteworthy how many of these are held of late, demonstrating perhaps that the dedication of all of life is no longer found. The fact is however that such devotion does not take place by one's own action but is caused by the Spirit of Christ, and found by faith in Christ as the Officebearer.

Moreover, not only have we become estranged from the office and the proper concept of it, but we also no longer have the right, and we no longer deserve to hold the office we once squandered. Thus this too is an obstacle for us to begin to live as an office bearer. When we do not have full confidence of faith in Christ as the One Who again obtained for us the right, the calling, and the qualification for the office, we keep ourselves far from it. And it is in this way that we often live our lives. We receive our schooling, choose an occupation, marry, have a family, achieve a position in life – and yet we tend to do this all duly and freely, according to our own insight, and seldom does it enter our consciousness that in all of this we have to fulfill an office before God. In doing all of this in this way we were not anointed.

Christ has come to assume the office that we had failed to maintain. Man was office bearer and that was all he needed to be. The office thus was not something added to him or ancillary, but defined and characterized his being created in God's image. According to God's words these two sentences are closely related: *Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground* (Gen.1:26). Being in God's covenant, we are at the same time office bearers. When we think of the covenant we think especially of the fellowship and communion we have with God; but that covenant at the same time contained our calling to the office. In fact, the one is not without the other. In order to be an office bearer, we must give ourselves in love to God. Thus when you say that you are in the covenant, you at the same time assert that you are an office bearer. With the breaking of the covenant, man at the same time suffered the loss of the office as well as the right to the office.

What Christ by His obedience first of all had to do was to obtain the right to the office and also the position of office bearer for Himself and for those who are His. Now it is true that Christ did not take the honor of the office upon Himself for that honor was given Him from above, and yet in His life on earth in obedience He needed to make Himself worthy of that office. Christ has been given to us as Officebearer from God, but for Christ it was a matter of earning what He had received.

It should be clear that Christ's position as Officebearer was entirely unique, and cannot be compared with any other, not even completely with that of Adam. In fact, the position of Adam's office was already an extraordinary one. He was after all the head of the human race, and if he had been obedient, all his descendants would have held their office only together with him and only in this way would have been able to fulfill it. Christ as the second Adam also has to take upon himself that position of Adam, in order that we in fellowship with Christ may have and fulfill our office again. However, to be able to do that Christ would also have to do other things. That is, He first of all and by Himself had to fulfill the office on our behalf in order to earn for us and to enable us to have the right to the office again. In addition, He needed to return the office to us again. And only then would we be able to speak of us being able to fulfill the office in fellowship with Him.

When we consider Christ performing the duties of the office all by Himself and in our place, we see Him as Mediator, and in this He is entirely incomparable. To be sure, Adam was our head yet not our mediator, for he did not administer the office in our place – Christ alone is our Mediator. Mediation is in fact unthinkable without Christ also being our Head. For in this capacity He acts as Head of a people that are not at all united with Him nor live in fellowship with Him. As Head He has placed Himself as Surety and Guarantor of a people that still live in estrangement from Him. Therefore with the mediation we presume and believe that He is indeed Head, but that He still needed to obtain as Mediator the communion, the fellowship between Head and members. From His side He has made Himself responsible for the people

He would gather to Himself, but from our side the response was still missing, namely coming to the fellowship. Thus while the mediation can never be separated from the Head, we do need to make the distinction that whenever he appears as Mediator He also is there as Head of His people.

First of all then, we need to keep in mind the labors Christ performed as Mediator for us and in our place. And secondly we must see the work Christ did and does so that we may be restored to the office. Finally what becomes clear is that our exercise of the office is in fellowship with Christ.

### ***Christ in Our Place***

With respect to the work that Christ did as Mediator in our place, the Lord's Day in its first answer does not include all three offices. With the treatment of the prophetic office the catechism only notes that He *has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption*, and therein is indicated only what Christ did to reinstate us in the prophetic office. But what He did as Prophet to obtain for us the right to the prophetic office is not mentioned. Only with the priestly office we read about the substitutionary work with the words: *Who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us*. Added to this is what He does in order to restore us to the priestly office: *and Who continually intercedes for us before the Father*. Also with the kingly office of Christ what is addressed is only what He does for us to make us kings again: *who governs by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us*.

Now indeed it can be said that what Christ as Mediator did in our place is centered in and focuses on His priestly deed, as Scripture says, *the LORD makes His life a guilt offering* (Isa.53:10). That does not take away then that in this action there was also a deed of prophetic declaration and one of kingly rule. We shall have to discern and distinguish all of that in it.

As prophet Adam's calling was to profess and acknowledge God as his God and Father, and to do this in word and deed. But he did not do that, and instead he denied and rejected God as his God and Father. Thus while Adam only needed to confess God, Who made Himself known as his God and Father in all the riches He bestowed on him and by which He demonstrated His favor. In Adam and with Adam all of us have disavowed and rejected God. Christ came in the place of all who were His to profess and openly to affirm God again as His God. He had to do that, however, while God completely turned Himself away from Him, and turned against Him. By that deed of confessing in such circumstances Christ had to cover and atone what Adam and we in and with him had done wrong. That act of acknowledgement and profession by Christ came especially when in the hour of complete forsakenness He called upon God as His God.

Of course this act of affirmation or profession was not limited to that moment, for during His whole life Christ acknowledged God as His God and Father. And we need to understand the importance of that accomplishment! Christ has done it while not one person wanted to do it, was no longer able, or had the right to do this. In a world completely alienated from God, Christ as the only One confessed and acknowledged God as His God and Father. He could do that because by His obedience to the very end He would earn the right again to call God His Father. In His time of course there were other believers who believed in and confessed God as their God and Father; but they could do this only because Christ by His action earned for Himself and for them that right again. And even with the limited knowledge of God among the Gentiles we will have to admit that this also is the result of Christ's deeds and words.

Thus, in the testimony of His life Christ was truly alone in the world; with the result that now there is no true confession of God as God and Father outside of and without the acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as Mediator. No one has the right, no one has the knowledge, and no one has the will for this. For there is no knowledge nor will for confessing God as Father in any human being who does not prior to that have the right to do this. Christ earned for Himself the right for this by His obedience; therefore He also had the knowledge and the will for it. He Who was rejected for our sake earned for Himself the right of sonship. It is hardly necessary to mention that He could only do this because He was not merely man, but also God. With Christ therefore we are able to speak of merit, but with us and also with Adam this is never possible.

As priest Adam had to devote himself to God with all the love of his heart. Constantly his heart and with it his whole life, that is his life in the body, would as it were be on the altar before God. That would be for Adam an expression of his love which was a response to the love God had given him. After Adam's fall and that of the whole human race in him, Christ

had to devote His heart in love to God even as the divine wrath consumed Him. Thus the burnt offering, that is, the sacrifice of dedication, became at the same time a guilt offering – a sacrifice of atonement. That was the offering of His heart, and with it the sacrifice of His life. It is in this way that the Scriptures can say that He came *to give His life [soul] as a ransom for many* (Matt.28:20), for His soul is His life, even as He gave His heart in this. And that life He lived in the body. Therefore the catechism can speak here of the *one sacrifice of His body*. Since a body is joined to the life in that body, so also in that life He gave the love of His heart.

Again we need to observe that Christ offered Himself in this way to the Father as a sacrifice, since no human could, or would, or even had the right to do so. No one was able to present himself as a burnt offering, a sacrifice of dedication, and what may be said about this without Christ is pretense and self-deception. The burnt offering of necessity now needs to be a sin offering. And only the Head of His own was able to sacrifice His life as a sin offering for Himself since besides being human He was also God. Thus He has redeemed us with the *one sacrifice of His body* and earned for us the right to the priesthood again so that we would be able to offer up our lives *as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship* (Rom.12:1).

As king Adam was governed by God's Word and Spirit and should have ruled himself and the world. In every office there is first of all a need to be open to God. Thus, as prophet he received God's revelation in order to know and serve God; as priest he needed to receive God's love in order to be able to respond to it with the love of his heart; and as king he had to be governed by God's Word and Spirit so that he could rule himself and the world. However, Adam failed in his obedience to God and with this his power over himself and the world vanished. Yet there had been nothing that impelled him to reach for something else. After all, the entire world gladly submitted to him, and even in his own heart the law of God was written. All he had to do was to undertake the leadership God had prepared for him.

Christ again had to achieve sovereignty and rule for Himself while the whole world turned in enmity against Him. And although He was the Holy One, yet we must not forget that in the weakness of the human nature He took upon Himself and as the result of sin, He also suffered temptations which were fully exploited by the devil. In a world filled with animosity Christ had to conquer for Himself power and authority again. He achieved this because even in the darkest hour when everything sought to motivate Him to rebel, He yielded Himself to the power of God's will. In His conscious suffering we see Him as King obtaining for Himself the right to have dominion.

Also at this point we need to mention that Christ is the only One Who controlled and ruled Himself and therefore was worthy to govern. We further note that what is construed among people as self-control, without and outside of Christ is pretense. These people are consumed by one craving, one passion, and because of that they keep all other desires under control. But then, this is not really ruling but rather being the slave of the one longing that directs them. Of course believers are consumed and directed by one desire – as also Christ was – namely the longing for God. That however is the leading purpose to which our nature is directed, and when we follow it we truly come to know ourselves, discover that we are becoming liberated and uncontrolled, and thus attain authority.

Without that authority and rule in the Name of God we cannot stand up to the world. There is no one who does not in the end lose in life, except the believer who through Christ has again been brought to God and to himself. Thus there is no one who controls himself and life except Christ alone, and there is no real authority and supremacy outside of faith in Him. His self-control and submission to God in the ultimate and final hour when heaven and earth turned in hostility against Him, secured the atonement for our sin and revolt. At that time He gained for Himself and for us dominion over heaven and earth.

It is in this way that Christ was Mediator in His threefold office, serving in His office in our place and through this He obtained the right for us to be office bearers again. We should place the emphasis on the fact that all of this was official work of Christ – deeds done in His office. The reality is not just that Christ on His own put Himself in place of a lost world. This view could be seen as an ethical consideration, namely that the world was isolated and could not find the way back to God. And so when Christ appeared in the world He walked on the way to God, and taught the people to go that way with Him. In this viewpoint we see only the voluntary deed of Christ – and this was present, to be sure.

But when we take note of the office of Christ however, we also see other things. Then we go out from what Scripture says, *No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God... So Christ also did not take upon Himself the*

*glory of becoming a high priest* (Hebr. 5:4,5). Thus God has conferred that office upon Christ and sent Him into the world to fulfill it. Therefore all of Christ's work was office-bearing, the carrying out of His assignment. And then we also see that Christ's assumption of the office was not arbitrary, but that He was sent to take up the office we had squandered. Thus also the whole of Christ's work is a satisfaction of God's justice, which we had offended by disavowing the office. Then we do not merely see the voluntary action of Christ, but also the demand and justice of God the Father, and consider His coming as a being sent by the Father. Thus we do not follow the so-called ethical point of view, but the one referred to as juridical or judicial.

Connected with this are further considerations. When Christ was ordained by God the Father to be Mediator, He was ordained as Mediator and Redeemer of His people, those whom God had chosen. Thus the whole of His mediatorial work is focused on those elect, and then we understand when the Scripture reveals that Christ did not die for all but for His own.

Should Christ have come to this world only of His own accord in order to go before them and to open the way to God, we could imagine that His coming would have been for everyone and that following Him on that way would depend entirely on man's free will. This view was taught by the Arminians of all times, an Arminianism that is older than the teaching of those with that name when it first appeared in the Netherlands. In such Arminianism there is always the tendency that we call "evangelical" or in a different context is also known as "ethical," in which the gratuitous deed of Christ alone is considered. However, if we see Him as God's Sent One, as the Officebearer, then we will consider all of His work as the fulfilling of a mandate, and then those actions in their results and consequences extend as far as that has been determined by the Father. And of course, then Christ has come for His people, His own.

This being Officebearer, this obedience in the labors of Christ, does not exclude the fact that in this task He gave Himself in voluntary love. The Father's assignment and Christ's voluntary, agreeable readiness coincide and correspond with each other. The harmony between both is clear to us in the context of the often quoted words: *I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those You have given Me, for they are Yours* (John 17:9). With all the willing zeal of His heart Christ has given Himself for them and prays for them; and the obedience of the official mandate comes to expression in this that He prays for those the Father has given Him and of whom He confirms that they belong to the Father. We also read: *Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love* (John 13:1). He gave Himself fully for those whom the Father had given Him, as He also says: *and I lay down my life for the sheep* (John 10:15), followed later by: *This command I received from My Father* (John 10:18).

The revelation of Christ's obedience in His office, as well as the restricted number of those for whom He was sent, must not be called fatalism. Then we look at it from the wrong point of view, for then we begin with men, that is, with the number of elect and not with Christ. Thus in the first place we must know Christ, and we cannot know Him in any other way than in His official work – that of His office. For when we know Him by faith in His obedience in and to His office and see Him and the Father, we belong to those for whom He came. The revelation of election does not exist in order that we should see the number of elect, but that we should see God as the electing God. And thus the official obedience of Christ does not exist in order that we should see the gathering of those for whom His work was intended by the Father, but that we should know Christ, and through faith we should have life in His Name.

It is hardly necessary to mention that according to Scripture Christ in fact came for the world. He is *the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). In the elect the whole of humanity and the world is saved organically. Moreover, the redeeming work of Christ has the greatest significance for the entire world in its present existence and thus for all people. The universal power of the official work of Christ exists in this that once the organic whole of humanity and the world is redeemed, it could not be brought to completion if that work did not include the preservation of the present world. In its history of the present its deliverance for the future is prepared. That is why the gospel of the official obedience of Christ must be preached to all creatures. And this must serve so that we may see Christ, and thus be saved.

### ***The Return of the Office to Us***

What the catechism in the first answer additionally says about Christ's work for us, needs to be considered from the perspective of the return of the office to those who are His. And the second answer must not be placed loosely next to the

first one. In fact, the essence of the second answer is already present in that of the first. As Prophet, Christ *has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption* in order that we would be able to be prophets again. With this is expressed directly that what belongs to the revelation of God's counsel to us is not only the proclamation of the Word, but also the opening of the heart and the illumination of the mind, in order that we would know God and Christ through that Word and be able to confess the Name of God.

We proceed from the understanding that a prophet is not someone who predicts the future. A prophet is someone who reveals God's secret counsel of redemption to us. That counsel has been fulfilled already partly in the past. It is not given to us "natural" people to see the past fulfillment of God's counsel concerning redemption. Even if we knew all the facts, history would still be restricted and shuttered to us. The meaning of history is the coming of God's kingdom, the redemption of a languishing creation, and the glorification of God's Name. To explain how God's intention in history is coming to fulfillment is the work of a prophet whom God has enlightened for this and who has received the revelation.

Thus Moses wrote the history of the world from the beginning to his own time, but he did this differently than any secular historian would ever be able to do this, for he wrote prophetically. Thus also the meaning of the present time is the outworking and fulfillment of God's counsel of redemption. We note too that the prophet Joel was primarily occupied with the circumstances of his and his people's time: the drought, the crop failure, and the locust plague. But he shows in this the hand of the LORD, the coming of the day of the LORD, that is, the day of redemption. It is in this way then that by means of a certain divinely given ability a prediction of the future is possible. However, that is not yet prophesying. When prophecy occupies itself with the future, it reveals in the development it predicts the coming of eternal emancipation, as that for instance takes place in the book of Revelation.

Through the prophets of the Old Testament, and after that by Himself proclaiming the Word on earth, and finally through the apostles and prophets of the New Testament, Christ has *revealed to us the secret counsel of God and will concerning our redemption*. But we need to see that Christ Himself was actively involved in this. He not only revealed something to the prophets so that they would proclaim this to the people, but He Himself spoke through their mouth. Thus even now He still speaks to us through their word, and we therefore still have in Scripture His own Word through which He speaks to us. We thereby understand that from this prophetic work of Christ flows the necessity of the inspiration of Scripture. Even today in Scripture He is still the living Prophet for us.

Moreover, connected to this is the Word-proclamation for all ages. Such proclamation is then bound to Scripture, since in it the counsel of redemption is fully revealed and thus nothing new is added to this. Yet this Word-proclamation is not a continual repetition of Scripture, since it should be prophetic. Of course, such proclamation is not infallible; but when the preacher by the Holy Spirit is bound to the Scriptures and receives insight from it, then even in our time there is a proclamation of the truth through Jesus Christ by means of the preacher of the Word. Thus also today there is prophecy in the world. And related and connected to this is also the opening of the heart and the illumination of the mind of believers so that they may understand the truth.

All of that was provided with the prophetic office of Christ. Therefore in this prophetic office is contained the promise that Christ through the one who proclaims will speak the Word as well as opening the hearts and minds of the believers so that they will understand the Word. We should not consider that these prerogatives may or may not happen according to God's will, which would then be seen as arbitrary. For the reality is that we have the promise and if we believingly accept that promise it will be fulfilled for us. And then we do not go to church to see if there is perhaps yet a word for us this time. It is clear that such an approach depicts unbelief with respect to Christ's prophetic office. For by faith we are certain that the entire prophetic proclamation will build us up. However, it puts on us the greatest responsibility both in preaching and in listening – a responsibility that can only be borne by preacher and congregation in close association with each other. For also this promise of God, contained in Christ's prophetic office, is not fulfilled automatically, but in a faithful reaching for the truth by the one who proclaims as well as by the congregation.

Through all of this Christ will make us prophets again. He *has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption* so that for us that counsel no longer is secret. That counsel was hidden for us because it constituted God's sovereign good pleasure, which we on our own would never have been able to discover. Moreover, that counsel is hidden from our sinful nature, so that we according to the flesh will never know it. Through the opening of our hearts and the illumination of our minds so that we are able to understand the Scriptures, we are no longer carnal

but spiritual. And now there is a connection, a bridge between the counsel hidden to the flesh and our understanding heart.

Now we may through faith, which also involves our own salvation, know about that counsel and be able to speak about it, and thus we are prophets reflecting our own anointing. Therefore John is able to write: *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth* (1 John 2:20). That means thus that we know all things that are necessary for us to know, and that we know them from God's revelation. Of course, there still are many things concealed for us, matters we do not need to know. But there are also many things still obscured that God nevertheless through Jesus Christ has revealed to us. In that case the reason is a lack of faith in Christ as Prophet, Who reveals all things that are necessary for us to know. Then we fail to have insight into the Scriptures that condemn us. And we must not come up with the thought that in this regard Christ has been anointed for us in vain.

With respect to the priesthood of Christ the answer states that He *continually intercedes for us before the Father*. That has as purpose to restore us to the office of priest. Daily He is busy reconciling us before the face of the Father. The apostle John writes: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have One who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world* (1 John 2:1,2). With that atoning John does not merely refer to what happened on the cross, but in this context especially to what daily takes place in heaven. Christ places Himself with the meaning of His sacrifice daily before the Father on behalf of those who are His, and applies to them in this way the atonement once obtained.

The question to be asked is whether we see this priestly work of Christ by faith. So often there is considerable hesitation to go to God and we have but little awareness that we already have received forgiveness, due to the fact that we do not by faith focus on this priestly work of Christ. By faith in that priestly work of Christ we are able to live in the awareness that every morning we may begin again with a clean slate – that every morning we are right with God.

However, this promise contained in the priestly work of Christ is not fulfilled automatically. The revelation of Christ's intercession needs to produce in us faith in its effective power. This ought to happen, and we must not refuse to have faith in it. And thus every morning we can go to the Father confidently, for what sin could there possibly be that Christ's reconciling action does not take away?

Thus it is that by this deed of Christ we are made to be priests again. For this reconciliation of Christ does not happen just so that we would delight ourselves in it, for if that were its purpose, faith in Christ's reconciling work would be an impossibility. Reconciliation takes place in order that we in love should daily place our purified heart as a sacrifice on the altar before the Lord. Faith in Christ as the Intercessor or Reconciler calls for this priestly task in us and constitutes the purpose of Christ's priestly work.

What Christ does for us as King is found in two clauses in the answer: *He has been anointed to be our eternal King, who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us*. This action of Christ means that He restores the kingly office to us.

First of all we need to pay attention to the fact that Christ governs us by His Word and Spirit. Thus every time we engage the office there first must be an acceptance of what God in Christ does for us and in us. And this is true also for the office of king. However, Christ does not seek to govern us by His Word as with a suggestive influence, for if the power of the Word worked in us as a sort of suggestion only we would not be set free by it, but would be led forward blindly. Instead, by His Spirit He also wants to bring our hearts in conformity with God's law, for then the law when it is preached to us is written on our hearts, and in obedience to the law we are set free. From this it is evident that Christ's will is not only to govern us, but His will is also that we should rule ourselves again. The very depths of our hearts need to be under our own control again, even if it is subject to and corresponds with the rule of Christ. Thus we come to have ourselves under control again because the law is written on our hearts. It hardly needs mentioning that the restoration here has only begun.

In that restoration to office, and now to the office of king, is found the redemption that Christ has earned for us and also applies. That redemption however is threatened from all sides, and we readily tend to lose full jurisdiction over

ourselves. There is a two-fold reason for this: the effective power we exercise over ourselves is still rather weak, while from outside of us we are frequently brought into confusion and disarray. Also this last factor is of great significance. For the reality is that at certain particular times we find ourselves in situations that for us are quite perplexing, and we lose a measure of control over ourselves. He *defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us*, presumes therefore a two-fold action on the part of Christ. He strengthens us inwardly in the influence over ourselves, and He controls also the various situations in which we find ourselves.

Thus we see the two-fold power that is given to Christ as King. He is an eternal King over His people whom He governs with His Word and Spirit; and He also has in this present time received the power and authority over this complicated world, so that in every situation He controls and directs it. This last power is temporal because it remains only as long as this world does, for at the end of the world He will return it again into the hands of the Father. Paul writes: *Then the end will come, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death* (1Cor.15:24-26).

In this power and authority of Christ we are to be kings in this world. He does not want us to lack power over ourselves, and He also controls all the situations we may experience in life. In addition, there is never any excuse when we become confused or confounded. In that power we must always be prepared to stand up and face life. However, the promise given in the kingly office we received from Christ is fulfilled only by way of exercising our faith, and when we by faith have a living relationship with Christ as King we will always be able to remain firm and standing. Faith is therefore also a demand, for there is no promise that does not also place us under obligation to believe.

### ***The Office of Believers***

The last answer deals with the office of believers. It begins with these words: *Because I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing*. Also about the office of believers we cannot say anything outside of faith, and thus we need to proceed from faith in Christ – a faith that includes our inception into the office. This office is a privilege, but in the first place it is a calling. With the office of Christ we distinguish between ordination, consecration, and qualification, and with the office of believer we must do the same. We expect the qualifying or enabling; but we expect this in faith that first bows before the consecration in Christ and after that consecration accepts the ordination. When we hope in Christ, we immediately are under the authority of the office. In fact, as soon as by faith we come into contact with Christ we must understand that together with Him the office is laid upon us, and then we also in this part of life need to live by faith embracing the promise, but also and first accepting the calling. We cannot hope for the privileges that God has given us in His covenant, without assuming the obligation. Thus both hoping for the privileges and assuming the obligations take place through faith.

Moreover, we must not detain our soul with doubts. It is our duty to accept the calling that through our consecration comes to us in fellowship with the whole church. When we accept that calling in faith, we not only may expect the equipping, but we will also more and more come to see the consecration as a privilege, as election, and we will more clearly understand therefore our ordination to the office.

When we focus on the office of believers we must not lose sight of the fact that believers in communion with Jesus Christ have been given this office, and by faith in Him we share in His anointing. In and with Him we are ordained, consecrated, and equipped for the office. Trusting in ourselves we have nothing and cannot do anything. But faith in Jesus Christ gives us new courage every morning.

Furthermore, we need to consider also that we have received the office in fellowship with all the believers, and that this is the special privilege of the New Testament. The anointing of prophets, priests, and kings in the Old Testament meant their separation from the people, and with this it was revealed that the entire community of people did not perform that holy service. Thus when the Lord promises that *you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Exodus 19:6), this applies to the nation as a whole and viewed in its office bearers – the members or citizens have not yet part in that anointing.

The apostle Peter applies that Old Testament promise, but now it involves also every member of the church when he says: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light* (1 Pet.2:9). The consecration of the special office bearers during the Old Testament period made the believers not only long for the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed One, but made them also long for their own anointing in communion and fellowship with the Messiah. That anointing came to all with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and because of this all believers are now office bearers.

The honor and dignity of this general office of believers needs to be guarded, for the Roman Catholic Church has returned this office back to the status of the Old Testament, whereas the Reformation has given the office of believers prominence again. There are of course special offices in the church, but there is no separation between those special office bearers and all believers. Yet also in the Protestant churches the tendency is evident to initiate that distance or separation again. The special office bearer does not have his office by himself but in fellowship with all the believers. The church must not become a bishopric or an episcopate, but neither must it become a ministerial church, that is minister-dominated.

Such deviation is not found only among office bearers but also in the congregation itself, for when the special office bearers carry out their office in place of and on behalf of all church members, the awareness of those members concerning their own office is not needed and they can then be 'lay people'. This comfortable life of escape can make church members seek to elevate and separate the special office, while on the other hand also reacting to it. And out of reaction they might then not only reject the improper authority and power of the special office, but might also refuse to accept the Scriptural guidance that should proceed from the special office. In this way the church disintegrates. Therefore the great significance of the apostle John's words needs to be seen among us: *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth* (1 John 2:20).

With all of these considerations, however, the importance of the special office in the church is not abandoned, for if Christ Himself is the Officebearer in His congregation, then He can also call people to serve in the special office. That special office nevertheless is always related to and connected with the general office of believer. Thus the special office does indeed have authority over the congregation, but it also arises out of it. It is true that there is a connection between Christ and the special office, but on the other hand there is also a direct link from Christ to the congregation and then to the special office.

This issue has particular significance in connection with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Who have received the Holy Spirit, the office bearers or the members of the congregation? Did the office bearers receive the Holy Spirit because of that office, or because they are especially spiritual people? Should we perhaps totally disregard the office bearers and focus only on the congregation, and conceivably esteem some of them particularly pious and notably spiritual members?

All of these questions have been raised and continue to be heard. However, the Holy Spirit has been poured out on the whole church, but then on the church led by office bearers. For the general office of believers cannot function properly when the church does not accept the leadership of the special offices. The apostle Paul writes: *It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up* (Eph.4:11,12). The conclusion is therefore that all church members are called to perform deeds of service in order to build up the body of the Lord, and the special office bearers are to equip them for such service.

By virtue of the fact that we are called to office only in communion with Christ and in fellowship with all His people, the pattern that our tasks in office need to follow is clear. We have the office not for ourselves but for Christ; moreover, we do not have the office for our own benefit but for building up of the entire congregation. Thus the service in the office of believers has been determined in the covenant of God, with Christ as Head and with all His own, and therefore also linked directly to the Word of the covenant. Every individualistic accommodation to some calling, and all spiritual excesses whereby the calling of the Holy Spirit is played out against obedience to the Word, is thereby removed. We have received the Holy Spirit insofar we understand the obedience to the Word and the bond we have with the entire congregation.

Believers are prophets so that they may profess the Name of Christ, and they need to do this in the first place as a fellowship, as church of the Lord. In our personal confession we take for ourselves the confession of the entire church, and only then is it a confession of and by faith. With our confession we do not give a statement of our personal experiences but instead we profess our salvation in Christ, which in its origin is exalted beyond us and realized in us only in part. Thus we confess the salvation in Christ as it has been revealed and given to the whole church, and wherein I share as member of that congregation. When we see clearly that this salvation has been granted to the church, it enables us to retain what in origin is so far above us, and that the confession can only be a confession of faith and by the faith that always remains dependent on the revelation of that salvation. When we leave out the congregation, we tend to fall into the error that we look for the starting point in ourselves, and then our confession consists of giving an account of our own experiences. But it no longer is a confession of faith.

The Name of the Lord must be confessed everywhere God calls us, not only in the church, and not only in some intimate setting. This coincides with the fact that the office of believer is not something incidental, but determines our whole life. We always have to be prophets, and such prophesying takes place in word and deed. Along with this we need to see to it that the Name of the Lord does not deteriorate into a slogan or in the publishing of a program. For then we would have become a party next to others and we would no longer be prophesying by faith, for we would no longer be speaking our own words which differ from that of the other people. By faith we must be prophets in word and deed, and speak of the redemption of life through Jesus Christ. That salvation was revealed to us by Jesus Christ Himself, and every moment in our prophetic office we remain dependent on Christ as Prophet. When we truly look to Him by faith, our word and deed are thereby redeemed and sanctified to God, and we prophesy in whatever we say and do.

As priest a believer must present himself as *a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him*, which is the sacrifice of our hearts in love and therefore the offering of our whole life. Also of this must be said that it needs to be a sacrifice of faith, made through faith that looks at Christ as High priest and that from the very beginning receives from Him the love of God. We are able to offer our hearts in responding love as those who have been reconciled and are endowed with God's grace. If we were to lose faith in God's grace even for a single moment we would have nothing to offer. And thus it is that we remain also in carrying out this office, dependent on what Christ continuously does for us.

With this we also note that the sacrifice of our love cannot happen in our own way. For God gives His love in the first place to His people, and in that fellowship we give Him our hearts in the worship of His Name as a sacrifice when we present our love and praise. Related to this is also the fact that love for God needs to be expressed as love for those whom Christ has gathered to Himself as a church. Thus there must not merely be love for a group of people we have chosen, for this kind of loving fellowship is boasted about in sectarian circles, and that is always a communion of the likeminded. It is easy to exercise fellowship in such a setting; but in doing so we merely serve ourselves. And the command is that we must exercise fellowship and communion in an assembly that Christ has gathered for Himself. We can see such a meeting only by faith as the gathering of believers, for only through faith in God's Word does that assembly meet and not through experience. It is through faith then that we practice fellowship in that gathering. *For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen* (1 John 4:20).

Related to and connected with love for the brothers is the love for all. We must be prophets to all, and must exercise our influence in the world as kings, but we have to do this as priests giving ourselves in love. That means in the first place that we are with Jesus in a loving manner and in this way bring matters to Him. Whenever we are in trouble in the sense that we allow ourselves to be overcome by intense emotions, as for example when we become embittered, at that moment we are no longer priests. Being priest means also that in powerful emotions we experience all kinds of things. But as soon as we merely deal with "cases" that we look at from a distance, our priestly office has left us. To be priest is to empathize with the world's suffering, and to bear this burden with Christ. In this way we not only have priestly hearts, but also priestly hands that bless and anoint life.

In this way therefore our priestly service has an important place in the community of God's people. In that fellowship our personal lives develop their potential. Yet the recognition of that potential never means withdrawing our personal lives from the other relations we normally have. Being busy with our personal lives could possibly mean a preoccupation, but then it would also suggest a disregard for God, Who calls us to His love especially in our numerous relationships. As soon as we separate ourselves from people in the relationship that God provided for us, it means from our side that we forsake God and we will be punished with spiritual bleakness.

We learn God's love, that is the love of God for us and also our love for God in the pathways in which He leads us. That is the way in which we maintain all those relationships and at times suffer in them. And then the sacrifice of ourselves as *a living sacrifice of thanksgiving* to the Lord becomes something different than a self-serving expression of love, and something else than giving in to various sentiments. Our love for God is then consecrated and sanctified in the struggle of faith wherein we continue to acknowledge His acts of love in all circumstances.

As kings we *fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures*. It appears this conflict too is a matter of faith. For we seek to do this with *a free and good conscience*, that is, with a conscience in which we are aware that in singleness of heart we serve the Lord and are not pursuing our own purposes. We have such a free and clear conscience only by faith, through which we are open for the rule of Christ by His Word and Spirit. The words *with a free and good conscience* remind us that the fight against sin and the devil is never merely a question of defense, but always in the first place consists of a functional service to the Lord. And that service can be done only in faith, through which we earnestly submit ourselves to His rule. Only through such faithful compliance can we distinguish the competing factors that might otherwise direct us. And then our struggle would no longer be with *a free and good conscience* for the Lord.

In that fight we need to acknowledge and experience the fellowship of all of God's people. I cannot become free from sin when I allow sin to prevail among the people of God. And opposition to sin is resistance against every sin that is evident in every community in which I live. If we do not view matters in this way, then the attempt at personal sanctification has possibly something by which we tend to isolate or separate ourselves from others, and through which we provide room for a certain pride. Sanctification takes place by way of being everyone's servant.

In this way self-control gains a proper place in our lives, and is no longer confused with yielding all those other desires to that single longing that guides us in life, especially the one to amount to something in our own eyes. And instead we have all our cravings under control because we know ourselves to be in the power of Christ. Only through this are we able to exercise influence over others, for only when we are entirely governed by the Word of God can we also rule in a spiritual sense. In such exercise of authority we are most intimately bound to Him, and this governing on earth is truly a preparation for life hereafter, when in eternity we shall reign with Him over all creatures.

We must admit, however, that this use of the office by believers in this life exists only in beginning and in principle. Nevertheless, we must not let this be our starting point, nor is our norm found in whatever in general the outcome may be. Our norm rather is in Christ's service in the office and this exceeds our norm. Our point of departure is in the official duties of Christ and they form the reason for our hope in fulfilling our office.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 13****33. Why is He called God's only-begotten Son, since we are also children of God?**

*Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God. We, however, are children of God by adoption, through grace, for Christ's sake.*

**34. Why do you call Him our Lord?**

*Because He has ransomed us, body and soul, from all our sins, not with silver or gold but with His precious blood, and has freed us from all the power of the devil to make us His own possession.*

**The Dividing Line**

After what we wrote previously about believing in the name, it is not necessary to consider that again at great length in this Lord's Day. However, the subject does come up here in a specific context. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God because that is how it is revealed in the Scriptures.

With respect to the Old Testament we must not only pay attention to passages in which the Messiah is called God such as, *For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Isa.9:6). Another one is: *This is the Name by which He will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness* (Jer. 23:6). But it was also revealed to Israel that no one else than the LORD Himself could be their Redeemer; and thus they said to LORD: *our Redeemer from of old is Your Name* (Isa. 63:16). They learned moreover to pray that God Himself would come down for redemption: *Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before You!* (Isa.64:1). And even though the believing people were not always clearly aware that the Messiah would be God, yet they did understand that no one else but God could be their Redeemer. They understood that from the prophecies, the Word of God; and they learned to live according to the Scriptures.

Without that revelation in the Old Testament the disciples would never have come to the realization that Jesus was truly God. In fact, Jesus began His ministry by revealing that He was the Son of man. Gradually the great powers in Him became known, but even with that the disciples would not have advanced any further than the crowds who said that a great Prophet had risen among them. The Scriptures and the expectation through faith that they received from them would lead them beyond that point. In addition there were the words of Jesus Himself: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me* (John 14:1), meaning that they should believe in Him as they believed in God. There were also additional sayings: *I and the Father are one* (John 10:30), and: *No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him* (Matt. 11:27).

Thus Peter, led further by the revelation, came to the confession: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Matt. 16:16). Even the leaders of the people were under the influence of that revelation, for the high priest asked Jesus: *Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God* (Matt. 26:63). The question has always been what was meant with the words *the Son of God*, and whether they meant to say that Christ was *the eternal, natural Son of God*. It was also possible that they could mean the special Sent One Who was filled with God's Spirit. Yet the believing and faithful conscious longing was that in this Sent One God Himself would be the Deliverer – the Redeemer.

In any case, for the disciples the resurrection of Christ from the dead removed the uncertainty and hesitation with respect to that. Thus the apostle wrote that *He was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead*

(Rom.1:4). And how this was understood can be heard in Thomas' confession: *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28), as well as from Paul's words: *Who is God over all, forever praised!* (Rom. 9:5).

Thus for us the Name of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Himself true God is in the Scriptures. We believe that He is God because God revealed Him as such, and also that Christ made Himself known in this way. Also in this confession faith is dependent on the Word of God, and we would not be able to maintain this doctrine if God's Word did not reveal Him in this way.

We need to understand the content of this confession properly. That God Himself came for our redemption cuts off every expectation that could possibly be entertained concerning man himself. In fact, if there should have been a creature that was enabled in a special way by God and by His Spirit to bring mankind to redemption, it would thereby be evident that the existence of humanity was after all not a total failure, and we could still properly have some sort of expectation of them. But since God Himself has come, it demonstrates clearly that all hope in mankind itself is futile.

Therefore we have here the fundamental question: Is Christ Himself God, or is He a creature extraordinarily qualified? It is with respect to this question that the definitive division takes place. When one does not confess that Christ is truly God, it does not really matter much what one further thinks of Him, however highly He may be praised. We can survey the various sentiments over succeeding centuries, from ancient Arianism to so-called socinianism, including several groups of ethicists, to today's modernists, and among them there is a great variety of views concerning Christ. But they are all in agreement on this one issue: Christ Himself is not truly and actually God. And thus all of them are found on one side of the division line. For them therefore there exists yet some expectation from mankind. This amounts to a rejection of the gospel, because it demonstrates its unique nature in the revelation of Christ as true God.

It is precisely on this issue that the gospel is completely against man, and opposes every expectation we may have of ourselves. It asks of us and works in us a total change through faith, a change that can be illustrated from history. Repeatedly in history the question has been raised how in the fourth century the Germanic nations almost without exception turned from their paganism to Arianism. Setting aside all the political motivations, and focusing exclusively on the spiritual realm, it means that exchanging paganism for Arianism constitutes no principial change. It is true that Arianism confessed many great things about Christ: He was the first and highest creature of the Father, created before all others, and by Him in fact all other creatures were made – but with all that honor they assigned to Christ, this fact remained firm that He was not from eternity God, but that also He was created in time.

This notion means that in Christ we are redeemed by a creature and not by God Himself, and that thus to the creature belongs the power and honor of redemption, indicating that evidently there was still the possibility of regenerative powers within him. And thus the situation for mankind was not so dire that God Himself needed to come for deliverance – that awesome wonder that exceeds all understanding, and counters every human expectation, and is explained only by the Scriptures, without which it cannot be understood nor visualized.

Thus the Germanic tribes with their conversion to Arianism fundamentally remained pagans. That exchange was easy because they did not lose everything on which they as humans had built their hope. Only gradually, as they let go of the Arian heresy the transition to true faith took place. And thus it was that as long as they did not confess Christ as true God their conversion to faith did not happen. Whatever variations may exist concerning the views of Christ are of less significance. The Arians were as far from the gospel as the present-day liberals. What draws the unequivocal line of division is a Yes or No with respect to the revelation that Christ is veritably and truly God.

Therefore, according to the Scriptures we believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and true God. By faith we cling to the Word of God, which convinces us of this. From ourselves this idea would not have arisen; and moreover God's Word frequently counters and contradicts thoughts that arise within our minds. However, that does not take away that when once by the Word of God faith in Jesus Christ as God has been created in us, we through faith see our very life in that confession, and can no longer live without it. By faith we then realize that only by receiving Jesus Christ as God are we able to have hope. Faith is involved in that astonishing marvel, and we come to recognize faith as living out of that miracle.

The Christian Church in her struggle with Arianism contended not only for God's truth according to the Scriptures, but also in this for her own life. We have to admit that many wavered in that conflict, and in that vacillation was a denial of the truth of God and of the life of the Christian church. However, the truth of God was stronger in the church than the lie; and thus stimulated by that truth a vital life emerged within her.

One can be amazed that also in later times and even currently, this line of demarcation is not seen sharply. The reason for the blurring of boundaries and especially this one is always found in the fact that the subjective starting point is from the religious person, and all religious expressions are then considered fundamentally the same. They contend that when it comes to religion we are one, even if there would be a denial of Christ as the Son of God! What is forgotten however is that this religious or spiritual person is never able to come to the confession of Christ as God, for he is always inclined to deify his creaturely abilities and powers, and thus to see the world filled with gods and demigods, and expects salvation from them. The conclusion thus must be that this religious person is not truly religious, and does not really come to God.

For only in meeting Christ as God do we actually come to God. It may indeed be considered strange that also in the present time this is not seen more clearly, and even in constructive, positive circles they speak so much yet concerning the 'religious person'! When will we be delivered from all this? Nevertheless, the truth of God will prevail in the church and create life, with the result that we will again see the dividing line drawn more sharply.

### ***The Only Begotten Son of God***

We confess in the Apostles Creed that Christ is God's only begotten Son. The catechism explains that He *alone is the eternal, natural Son of God*. With this, one thinks of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father. In opposing Arianism the church has confessed the doctrine of the Son at great length in the Nicene Creed where we find the words: *And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father; through Whom all things were made*. With those words the church attempted to give an explanation of the names *Father* and *Son*. In considering the Trinity in Lord's Day 8, some explanation is given. The Father communicates Himself eternally to the Son, and eternally presents Himself to Himself in the Son. *Because God has so revealed Himself in His Word that these three distinct Persons are the one, true, eternal God*. Thus it is said in the Nicene Creed that the Son is *of one substance with the Father*, and also here in the catechism it is confessed that He *is the eternal, natural Son of God*.

However, we also speak about what we call the ontological Trinity, and about this very little indeed can be confessed. In fact, we always look up against this. From this ontological Trinity we distinguish – not separate – the revelational Trinity. God has revealed Himself as the Triune God because He comes to us differently as the Father than He does as the Son, and again differently as the Holy Spirit. We discern then that the Father comes to us through the Son in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and that the Son participates in this and so does the Holy Spirit. All of this was determined in God's eternal counsel. There is of course no possibility that the ontological Trinity falls within that counsel, for this concerns the eternal Being of God, and this is above and behind every decision of God. However, how God would reveal Himself to us is subject to God's decrees, as is our existence and life subject to His decrees. We need to focus especially on that revelational Trinity, in order to learn from the Scriptures that behind this is the ontological Trinity.

We must not forget these dynamics when we confess Jesus Christ as *God's only begotten Son*. For with this is meant the confession of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father as expressed in the catechism: *the eternal, natural Son of God*. Nevertheless, the words *the only begotten Son of God* echo the revelational Trinity very clearly. In the Son the Father gives Himself to us in His love. With the words *the only begotten Son of God* we are powerfully reminded that He is the Son of God's love, that is, the Son Whom God gives to us in His love. Scripture states: *For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves* (Col. 1:13). It is clear that we should be reminded here of the affirmation of the Apostles Creed: *I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord*. We confess there not merely that there is an eternal Son of God, but that Jesus Christ in Whom God gave Himself to us, is the only begotten Son of God.

Furthermore, this idea also is not forgotten in the catechism, since the last half of this answer states that we are adopted as God's children *through grace, for Christ's sake*. Our sonship is founded on what God has given us in the Son. In

Scripture this understanding is immediately evident in the revelation concerning the Son, also when it seeks to assure us that Jesus Christ is truly God. Thus we read about Christ: *And we are in Him who is true-- even in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life* (1 John 5:20).

In connection with this we need to refer here to what we mentioned in the first section on this Lord's Day. We noted there that with *the Son of God* we should think primarily of the One God specifically sent, which is notably evident in the name Christ. When Christ calls Himself God's Son, He has identified Himself with that understanding. Scripture in fact designates those particularly sent ones as gods, and Christ refers to that: *If He called them 'gods,' to whom the Word of God came-- and the Scripture cannot be broken-- what about the One Whom the Father set apart as His very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse Me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'* (John 10:35-36)? Consciously and knowingly therefore Christ adopted and identified with the expression *God's Son*. Thus in a special unique sense Christ is the Sent One of the Father. Nevertheless, by faith we also need to understand from the Scriptures that it is not enough for us to receive a creature that is sanctified and sent by God, but what we needed was God Himself coming to us.

Connected with this is that God also in the beginning did not give us something or even many things, but that He gave Himself in the Son as the eternal Word. In the same way for our redemption He needed to give Himself to us in the Son. In Christ we need to come to God again, for otherwise we are not religious, that is, people who are bound to God.

By now it has been adequately established that with the words *God's only begotten Son* we need to think of the Son in Whom God gives Himself to us in love. Then the faith that Jesus Christ is God's Son can never be a so-called historical faith, and such faith can never be a matter of speculation. When we theoretically reject all other ideas, it does not yet mean that we live by faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. For since in that confession is found the love relationship that God in His Son wants to have with us, that confession is ours only when we ourselves are in fact involved in that love. After Christ's resurrection Thomas did not just confess that Christ was Lord and God, for that can never be confessed in abstraction. In fact Thomas confessed: *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28). If there had not been that personal relationship Thomas could never have realized that Christ was also God. Therefore seeing Christ as God immediately suggested Thomas' redemption.

When we confess God's saving love in Christ, it means the redemption of our lives. And all-decisive then is the fact that we confess Christ as God, for then His redeeming love embraces us totally and our independent trusting in ourselves cannot be a factor any longer. For when God is our Redeemer He wants to be our all, and He must be everything for us in that redemption. And because He is God, He cannot and will not share that place with anyone or anything. Thus there is something liberating in surrendering ourselves to our Savior as God, and our faith – also when it is faith in Jesus Christ – is faith in God. In Christ we are redeemed by God, and the church firmly and faithfully defended that truth in the struggle against Arianism and also later.

From what has been said above it follows that the distinction between so-called objective and subjective doubt must be rejected. With that so-called objective doubt is meant in this connection the doubt of whether Jesus was really God. And with the so-called subjective doubt they suggest the reservation concerning one's own salvation by Jesus Christ, while for them then by a so-called objective faith they contend also that Jesus is God.

However, we cannot confess Jesus as the Son of God, unless in Him we know God's love has come to us, for faith has no affinity with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ except in that personal relationship. We therefore better tell ourselves that if we doubt whether we have been adopted and saved by that love, we are actually busy denying that we receive God's love in Christ. That the situation is like this is often obscured by the fact that we could be influenced by a certain suggestion, wherever it came from, and be able to say that Jesus is the Son of God. And this suggestion of course does not indicate that Christ is our Redeemer. Being moved by such a suggestion could be conceived as faith, and might be called an objective faith. It is true that Scripture a time or two speaks about that kind of faith, namely in connection with Simon the sorcerer and with king Agrippa. This is written apparently to warn us against such self-deception, for the conduct of Simon the sorcerer and of king Agrippa merely had the appearance of faith.

Generally however Scripture speaks of faith in the true sense of the word. And when it now and then uses the word faith for what is really only a pretense and sham we must not, being influenced by it, speak of an objective faith when we are distinguishing theoretically. For then we would not explain or clarify anything, but rather lead astray. True faith that Jesus is the Son of God is only possible when through that faith we surrender ourselves fully to Him. We need to hold on to the unity of the act of faith. When we seek to differentiate two things in this, we would not only make the understanding of faith impossible, but also hinder the act of believing. We would learn then to look at our own faith and not at the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

### ***Adopted as God's Children for Christ's Sake***

What we said above concerning faith is confirmed by the content of the first answer of this Lord's Day. Immediately following the confession that *Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God* is that other statement: *We, however, are children of God by adoption, through grace, for Christ's sake.* We cannot say the first without the second, and the entire answer is the expression of one and the same faith. In this answer we articulate our faith, and the second clause illuminates the first, for truly, the two belong together.

Of course, there is a dependence of the second with respect to the first. Thus we are not attempting to learn first of all that we are children of God, for in that way we would never reach the answer. We need to look at Christ, and by faith we learn to understand that God wanted to come to us in His full love through Christ. When by faith we understand that, we are overpowered by it unto redemption and we can also learn to know our salvation. Knowledge of our sonship is not determined independently, and much less are we able to deduce from our sonship the Sonship of Christ, but on the other hand we are able to come from Christ's Sonship to ours. If our sonship is dependent on the Sonship of Christ, then our knowledge of the first is also dependent on that of the second. In the words *for Christ's sake* is contained the focus of our faith. And then by faith we see Christ as the Son of God, and find that we too are children of God.

Not only is the focus of our faith indicated in the words: *for Christ's sake*, but they are also the basis for our sonship. With those words we look not only at the Son of God, but at Jesus Christ as the Son of God. And not only that in the second Person as the Son of God the basis lies for our being His children, but in this that Jesus Christ, He Who took to Himself our flesh and blood, is the Son of God. The Son of God in love has united Himself with our nature, and in this He took our sins upon Himself and with His death and resurrection has overcome them. Therein is found the foundation of our sonship.

It is necessary in this to distinguish clearly. We are able to speak about "again" being adopted as God's children, for once we were adopted in Adam as children of God. That was a separate deed of God. He created us in His own image, and yet with all of that we were not yet children of God. What needed to happen yet was the adoption as children. That took place in establishing the covenant relationship between God and man. True, man had been created in God's image in order that he would be God's child. Thus the plan of God's covenant dominated and influenced His creation of man in God's image, but the institution of the covenantal relationship and the adoption of man as son of God followed however only his creation in God's image. That adoption of man as son of God also took place because of the Son as the eternal Word, since it had pleased God to place in the Son all His love for man, and through the Son to have that love come to him. The relationship of Father and son came into being only when God, because of the Son, established the covenant between Himself and man. The sonship is based on that act of adoption, for then man through the Son received God's fatherly love.

Through sin we broke the covenant, rejected God's fatherly love, and thereby relinquished our sonship. With respect to God we made ourselves "independent." And even though the fact that we were created by God was not undone, and although something of God's image remained in us, it does not follow however that we still in some way remained children of God. Precisely because our sonship was the result of that adoption at the establishment of the covenant, the Father and son relationship was completely abolished with the breaking of the covenant. Thus no one can maintain that even now all people are still children of God, even though His image in them has not disappeared entirely.

It has pleased God to adopt some people again as His children. Also now what is decisive for them to be adopted as His children is that He received them again in His covenant as His children. And this time also it took place because the Son, that is, because of the love which He in the Son decided to give to man. Now, however man first had to be ransomed from the debt that he had piled on himself with the rejection of that love. For this the Word needed to become flesh and in that capacity suffer and be raised again for us. It is in this way that the words *for Christ's sake* have received an even deeper meaning. And now God has *for Christ's sake* adopted to be His children those who were the objects of His good pleasure. Only of them we can say that they again are *children of God*.

This last mentioned, namely that the adoption as children took place according to God's sovereign good pleasure has often represented an obstacle for faith. The question then is: How do I know that I also belong to those whom God has chosen to adopt? In asking the question there could be the wish to intrude into God's eternal counsel in a way that has not heard the call to faith. And it is equally evident that the answer about one's own sonship comes by looking at the evidence in one's own life of being a child of God. With this it must not be forgotten that with our sonship the first thing is not being changed into the image of God, and this has as result that the characteristics of that change are not so clear at first.

It should be clear that the first thing is being adopted as God's children, and we can know that adoption only by faith, and only through that faith the change appears that reflects the image of God in us. Thus we can only know about our adoption as His children by faith. And yet Scripture does not tell us personally, to each of us, that we have been adopted. In fact Scripture tells us that in Christ God adopts a person again to be His child, and thus Scripture always first focuses our attention on Christ. But then through the revelation of Scripture we must not merely see that fact of the adoption as such.

Regretfully we are often busy with inferred or assumed facts. Instead, we should always want to see God and His love that He gave us by which He proves that He again wants to adopt us as His children. Then we are striving to see Christ in Whom God again placed the claim of His love on all of mankind, according to His covenant. And then it becomes an accusation against us that we have not recognized that and have lived in indifference to it. For as soon as by faith we see that God in Christ again adopted man as His child, it captures us. And then that adopting by God of "man" in Christ increasingly takes on a personal dimension. At first it seems still too great for us that we would dare to accept it, but coming from Christ it continues to press itself on us. And then the claim that God in Christ lays upon us becomes a special privilege that we do not dare to refuse and we receive it by faith as our election.

Thus we come from faith in Christ and from the covenant and resting in Him as Head, to our personal election. Covenant and election are not each other's contrasts or opposites, but through the covenant we do come to believe our election. Therefore our adoption as children of God is not like a prize in a draw, and we do not investigate by looking for all kinds of characteristics whether we have received the prize. Instead, by faith we look at Christ and are serious that we have been adopted as God's children *for Christ's sake*.

This adoption as children is the decisive factor which we come to know through faith. As soon as we know this by faith, the conversion of our life has already begun, and with this the return of the image of God is also taking place. However, through faith we also struggle for that restoration, knowing that Scripture states: *Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His Name, He gave the right to become children of God* (John 1:12). Thus those who believe in Him have the authority to become children of God. And because of adoption they have the right to call themselves God's children. We understand therefore as far as we are concerned everything hinges on faith, by which we understand God's good pleasure in which He adopted us to be His children, and thus through faith we contend for the image of God.

### ***Our Lord***

It is necessary to maintain a close relationship between the fourth Name *our Lord* and the earlier *God's only-begotten Son*. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament the word *Kurios* or Lord is used for Yahweh or Jehovah, God's covenant name. Thus that Christ is Lord indicates that He is God, and especially in connection with this, that God in His covenant gives Himself to us in love through Him. And in showing His love in Christ, God is Lord even as at one time in

that same love in the Son as the eternal Word He was Lord. What we experience therefore is the supremacy of divine love in Christ.

This supremacy cannot be compared with any other, for Christ is not only Lord next to other lords, but all dominion and power on earth exist only because and through His dominance in love. In that love existed after all, the *motif*, or dominant theme for the creation of all things, and therein is also the reason for their present existence. We read: *He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together* (Col. 1:17), and because their basis for existence as well as their fundamental purpose in life is found in Him, His sovereignty is absolute. He is able to do with them in accordance with His sovereign good pleasure, and thus He requires complete submission and obedience.

There is no doubt that the confession of *our Lord* represents a special nexus between that Lord and us. In the way He is *our Lord*, He is not Lord of all. The difference lies only in this that we by faith have learned to acknowledge Him as Lord, and in that way He has given Himself to us in the supremacy of His love. And thus He makes all things work together for good for us. Yet that does not take away that He is Lord of all and everything. However, with the confession of *our Lord* we may not isolate it from His dominion over all things, and we must not do this by placing two kingdoms next to each other, the kingdom of His power and the kingdom of His grace.

There is only one kingdom in which He reigns in love as Lord. The rule of His love reveals itself on the one hand in His wrath for those who reject His love, while on the other hand He displays His love to those who faithfully submit to it. When we confess Him as our Lord, and yet at the same time isolate ourselves from His authority over all things, we would not be able to see Him as our Lord and our God at the same time, and we would also not be able to yield ourselves in faith to Him. The expectation we have from Him would then immediately be restricted from all sides. It is truly our expectation and comfort that He Who shows us His grace as our Lord, is the true God.

In being Lord He is specifically the Leader of history. The origin of all things lies in the love of God, and in giving His only-begotten Son, while they find their objective and purpose in the glorification of that love, they are also guided by that love. That love has sovereignty and authority. Thus Scripture states: *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever!* (Rom.11:36). That means *from* God in His grace in Christ. All three things mentioned are intimately related to each other. The sovereignty is so comprehensive that in the same love is found both the origin and purpose of all things. And yet in the confession of being Lord, His authority and control stand out and in that sovereignty He enforces His law which He has given to the world. Moreover, He asserts that leadership also in the judgments He brings on the world when that law is rejected.

Moreover, this government is such that His love when it is rejected not only displays wrath and judgment, but is also of that nature that it again reaches out to the world. And the end of this rule will be the victory of that searching love, and in God's favor the restoration of the world and mankind. All things must work together for the victory of that love. In that sense Christ is *our Lord*.

It is a struggle for faith to continue to confess that in the unfolding of history such love has control of it. We would much rather believe that something else on earth governs events rather than love, namely something like the power of sin and of the devil. It is hard for us to accept that the entire development of events is in the hands of God's love in Christ, and that all controlling power, however it may be abused, finds its origin in the dominion of Christ. This is a daily problem for us. And when our faith seeks to understand this, it encounters yet another difficulty. For when we see that every judgment and punishment comes from His hand, it is possible and at times easy for us that these judgments serve to produce some detachment with respect to Him. We learn that faith always needs to overcome something in order to recognize the hand of love in the chastisement.

Thus the confession that Christ is Lord is truly a confession of faith. For by faith we cling to the Scriptures that tell us that He is Lord. We believe in His Name as the Scriptures reveal this to us. But we always seem to have to make a leap of faith in order to get over the things as we first saw them, in order to be with the Lord and to be able to see the same things in a different light. In these matters it becomes plain that the confession of Christ as *our Lord* is not possible without the surrender of our hearts to Him. With a so-called historical faith we cannot possibly begin to solve the issues involved. Thus the confession of Christ as Lord is only possible when at the same time it reflects a confession of the

special relationship between that Lord and us. Thomas did not just confess Christ as God and Lord, but exclaimed: *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28).

This confession of faith means therefore not only seeing things differently, that is, viewing the development of events from a different perspective, for no doubt it is already a great comfort that we know that with the conquest of God's love, Christ Himself is also involved. But faith in Christ as Lord also gives us immediate participation in His reign. Through faith in Christ we also receive a glorious and satisfying life, namely a life in which we also rule and are lords. This does not militate against that other fact that we belong to Him as His servants and slaves. For something of our Lord's glory radiates upon us in this life. In this way we need to be with Him as lords as well and thus share in His Lordship.

And immediately by faith we are in Him, for then something of His love is also in us. And on earth that love so to speak always wears a crown and a scepter. When it endures all things, believes, and hopes, then therein it is victorious and shares in the victory of Christ. It is not by force but through a love that is enkindled by Christ's love, that we have a life in which we are lords and masters. That does not mean however being invincible and having inner victory over injustice and inequity, for love also has power and exercises influence. Through unbelief with respect to Christ's rule of love, and through the lack of love which is the consequence of that unbelief, the power of demons is multiplied around us and in us. Somewhat later we will be able to consider further what it means that He has ransomed us from all our sins and *has freed us from all the power of the devil*. But here we merely need to make the comment that the redemption of Christ demands of us our involvement in faith and in love. With the blessing that Christ brought us nothing happens automatically, for He is *our Lord* in the faith and the love that we practice.

With this the significance of the confession immediately strikes us, namely that He is *our Lord*. In the victory over sin and the devil the relationships are being restored in love. The exaltation of Christ as Lord – which also happens in our faith – brings about healing to the fellowship of God's people. Every believer is able to speak of *my Lord*, as Thomas did, but that certainly does not mean a kind of isolation and seclusion. Thomas was separated from the circle of disciples by his unbelief; but when he confessed Christ as his Lord, he was again included in the fellowship of the disciples. Now it is always true that this community wherein Christ is confessed as *our Lord* comes first, and that then everyone confesses Him as “also my Lord.” The rule and authority of Christ really does not mean the restoration of individual people, but the restoration of mankind and the world – those who in God's love find their life's meaning in Christ alone.

### ***Ransomed and Redeemed***

We have mentioned the development of things several times. With that we did not merely intend a development as a result of powers that were once placed in things. We reject the idea of evolution exclusively as a result of immanent factors. Should we accept such a concept we would deny that Christ is Lord. And however much we may speak of development and however frequently we acknowledge therein that Christ with His control and direction employs the existing factors, nevertheless we confess that every moment is also available for His disposal. In that sense He determines and adapts the circumstance of every moment, and how the origin and increase of sin fits in this will likely always remain a mystery; but nevertheless also over every moment in that process Christ is Lord.

In this way we see Him also as Lord in the consequences of sin. The judgment and punishment are not only the natural results that invariably come from wrong actions. For if we viewed the penalty of sin in this way there would be room yet for the idea that sin and its fallout would naturally be conquered by evolution some day. Instead, every result of sin is a response of that love which also avenges itself, thereby judging its rejection. We are *sold under sin* (Rom.7:14 KJV), to use the words of Scripture. That revelation of being sold counters the idea of evolution, in which sin and its consequences can be overcome. Thus, we are handed over to judgment and constrained by the guilt of sin, that is, a captive of the curse. And also in this the power of love is evident.

The apostle Paul writes of being sold under sin right next to being carnal: *I am carnal, sold under sin* (Rom.7:14 KJV). He writes that because he is sold under sin, it is a law now for his sinful nature that keeps him captive. He cannot do anything else according to his nature than to sin. Yet every moment of that inability of our flesh has been determined by Him Who placed us under His judgment and sentence (Rom. 7:13-26).

Thus there is no liberation in evolution, for that can only take place with the removal of the judgment. Once we have been sold under sin, there has to be a ransom from that judgment. Therefore this answer in harmony with Scripture is able to say that He *has ransomed us, body and soul, from all our sins, not with silver or gold but with His precious blood.*

One can always raise the question of whether no other avenue for such redemption would have been possible, other than the ransom by Christ's blood. Such a question cannot be answered in the abstract, for with God being omnipotent nothing is impossible. However He has bound His relationship with us in His covenant to certain norms. He is *our Lord* in His covenant, and He maintains for Himself the norms and regulations He instituted. In keeping with the declaration and sanction in His covenant we have died, that is, sold under sin and handed over to the power of the devil. By virtue of the fixed purpose of the Lord of the covenant we have been expelled from the fellowship of His love. We can only be redeemed by a ransom from that rejection into exile according to the justice of His covenant. It is clear that Christ did not pay the price of His blood to the devil but to the justice of God's love, and because of that claim we were handed over to the tyranny of the devil.

When we consider Christ's relationship with us in this way, we see yet another side of His Lordship. It is readily evident that He bought us as a man: He became one of us, bowed Himself under our curse, suffered the guilt, paid the price of His blood to the justice of God's love, and ransomed us from exile. He did this as a man, although in it He was moved and sustained by the power of His divine love. Thus as man He became *our Lord*. And as the catechism confesses, He came *to make us His own possession.*

We need to distinguish this Lordship of Christ as man and as Mediator from His eternal Lordship as God. As man and as Mediator He received this power from the Father and earned it by His suffering. And through this He obtained the right to be our Head, and as our Head also to rule over all creatures. Thus because He received that right, He also could deliver us from all the power of the devil, since He returned to us through faith the fellowship with God and thus made us to be born again.

From this answer of the catechism it is evident that in its description it focuses especially on this Lordship of Christ as man and as Mediator, for the answer refers to the fact that *He has ransomed us, body and soul, from all our sins, not with silver or gold but with His precious blood.* However, the word *Kurios* as it is used in the Apostles Creed, intends to suggest His eternal Lordship as God. Now it is clear that in Christ these two are impossible to envision separately even for a single moment, just as we may not ever separate the human and the divine in Him. When we call Him Mediator we always consider the divine and the human together. His rule that He achieved as man was immediately embraced by His eternal Lordship as God.

Adam as our head would never have been able to ransom us with his blood, and never would have received the power to rule over all enemies and to free us from their power. Yet the power of Christ's divine love led and enabled Him to bring the sacrifice, and it also made Him worthy to receive the power and rule over all creatures, even the enemies. Thus we are connected with Christ as our Lord in a twofold union. As our Head He became one with us, bore our burden, and with His own blood has earned the right to rule over us. We realize that we are closely connected with Him, for our life was His life, and because of this His life also has become our life. Yet the power He exercises over us is not limited to one side, for behind that authority He obtained and earned we always see His divine rule.

Thus He became man and was related to us very closely and yet at the same time as God He is exalted far above us. And that is ever the surprising, the for us always endearing and fascinating nature of the relationship with Him. We know that He has our flesh and blood, and at the same time we adore Him, not because of the power He obtained, but because of what He eternally is in Himself. Thus we cannot merely focus on Christ's one revealed side and ignore the other. If we were to imitate Christ's service and one-sidedly place Him within the realm of the creaturely, we would forget that He is at the same time the exalted God. In such a way adoration disappears from the service of Christ, and over the long run it would become humanized. Of course it is also possible to place exclusive emphasis on the worship and forget that He also became one with us as humans. And then our redemption becomes unreal and insubstantial, and all that remains for us is a distant, remote God. Since in Christ's Lordship as God and as man His true relationship to us is revealed, we shall by faith cling to Him in His oneness as God and man, and also in the confession of Him as *our Lord*.

## ***Ransomed with His Blood***

We are the possession of Jesus Christ because He has purchased us with His blood. He did not present gold or silver, not all the treasures of this world, but He offered Himself as a ransom for our redemption, for what was involved concerned the souls of men which cannot be bought with all the treasures of the world. Only a soul prepared to give itself for them is able to deliver them, and not blood as such is redeeming. It was the love in which Christ gave His blood, His soul, His life for His own that made his dying a sacrifice of atonement. And with that love we must not merely think of the love of His human heart. Scripture says: *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Rom. 5:7-8).

It is therefore clear that Christ was moved by a love that was not merely human, but also divine. His human love went out from and was sustained also in its highest point by His divine love; and both of these in Him are one. In His sacrifice there was an impelling love that cannot be measured, and that made it of such immense value. We read about *the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb without blemish or defect* (1 Pet.1:19), and thus also the catechism speaks of *His precious blood*. For this was the blood of the Son of God's love, in Whom that love is fully given to us.

That He bought us with His precious blood also determined His relationship to us as our Lord, and likewise our relationship to Him. When He was prepared to ransom us at such a cost, then surely He will never let us go; and what He once bought with His death He protects now with His life. Thus in keeping with the intent of the catechism, that when we confess Him as *our Lord*, we confess not only that He earned the claim of rightful ownership with respect to us, but that it also means that He pursued His right and *has freed us from all the power of the devil to make us His own possession*. All of that came from Him through His Spirit and Word by which He taught us to cling to Him in faith and to follow Him by faith. Through His Spirit and Word His love continually goes out to us and conquers us so that we believe and respond in love. What is it that makes His love so strong every day again, so that He always holds on to us and always again reveals Himself to us? Part of the answer is the fact that He ransomed us at such a high price.

In addition, the fact that He once substituted Himself for us also must determine our relationship to Him. This can be worked out in two ways, from the viewpoint of our faith and from that of our service.

What should we expect from His love as this functions in our lives? Surely His love will overcome all difficulties in our lives. However, in order that we experience complete happiness, there is the condition that His love must be truly sufficient for us. Of course we are able to enjoy all the other things in life, but we always need to see them as an expression of His love. When we are truly His possession in body and soul, we have nothing outside of Him, and everything that is ours is also His at the same time. It is ours because it is His, and He has bought it all for us with the price of His blood, and we acknowledge His love in all of it. Thus when all is taken away from us we will not feel dispossessed, because His love has remained the same, and what fills our life must be His love with which He bought us. By faith in that love we are able to cope with all things.

It is especially when we recall that His love is also a divine love, that there should not be a limit to our abilities. Christ Himself said: *If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you* (Luke 17:6). Of course this does not open the door to expectations of arbitrary miracles and thereby do away with the use of means; but we should be able to expect without limit whatever is necessary for the coming of His kingdom in us and through us. With this we should then think that it does not consist in the power of our faith, but in the unlimited power of love, of which we take hold by faith. The power of faith is not in faith itself or in its measure but in its content, namely in what causes it to exist and to what it then clings. The most simple faith is then the strongest. The power of faith is so great and effective because the unlimited love of Christ is given to it. And in this way He is our Lord Who determines everything for us and in us; and even though we are His possession we are also ourselves masters who through His power are able to do all things.

Also from the viewpoint of our service all things are determined by His love through which He bought us. If His love and all that He undertook for us is limitless, then also our work for Him is endless, and there is nothing that we do not

owe to Him. In the context wherein He explains about the faith like a mustard seed that can do all things, He also speaks about our never-ending service. He did that in the parable about the servant who came home tired from work in the field, but who cannot just sit down to eat his own meal, because he first has to prepare and serve supper for his master. The master demands that of him because his belongs body and soul to that lord. And when he has done what he was told, he is still a servant who like us can only say: *We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty* (Luke 17:10). It is in this way that Christ has the right to everything in our lives – and every day again – because we are with body and soul *His own possession*. We will never be able to say that we have done enough for Christ, for in fact there is never an end to our duties. When we are finished with the one, the next one faces us. We need to hold this perspective before us every day again, namely that that we are the possession of Him Who bought us with the price of His life.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 14****35. What do you confess when you say: He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary?**

*The eternal Son of God, Who is and remains true and eternal God, took upon Himself true human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, through the working of the Holy Spirit. Thus He is also the true seed of David, and like His brothers in every respect, yet without sin.*

**36. What benefit do you receive from the holy conception and birth of Christ?**

*He is our Mediator, and with His innocence and perfect holiness covers in the sight of God, my sin, in which I was conceived and born.*

**God and Man in one Person**

Theology is a dangerous undertaking. It is a science, and science is one of the many pursuits of human life. Also this activity has been created by God and is continually sustained by Him, making it therefore good and necessary. Nevertheless, science and particularly theology is dangerous. Many times in history heresy has come from the realm of theological science. And then the church had the burden to deny and reject that heresy in her confession.

However, that is not the only and not even the greatest danger coming from theology. Science, thus also theological science, is only one of the pursuits of human life and therefore ought to occupy a modest place in society. Besides scientific knowledge, we realize, there is yet another way of knowing. For when the church and every one of her members confesses the truth of God in harmony with His Word, is not a scientific activity; and yet the church ought to know that truth and should pursue it thoughtfully.

All deliberation is not scientific consideration. The church lives out of the truth, contemplates that truth, and learns to understand it more comprehensively, thereby enriching her. It is in this way that such knowledge of the truth is at the same time her fellowship with God. With scientific consideration however, people place that which they reflect on objectively before them and then focus on it with their analytical, probing minds. Scientific pursuit of theology does not directly translate into progress for the life of fellowship with God. In fact, the danger exists in theological thought that one distances himself from actual life. Of course, we are not saying that it is possible scientifically to pursue the truth of God without living out of it by faith. For when faith is absent one cannot even know that truth, and it is impossible for such a person to make it his object of examination. And when someone should then nevertheless attempt to do so, he would really be pursuing a fantasy and not a reality. What is essential for a genuine theological examination is the association of faith to the truth.

With the above we do not suggest either that scientific examination could not serve our living out of the truth. Theology also has been a blessing for the church, and not only because it helped the church more easily to recognize errors, but because it can also assist accurate understanding of the truth and thus help to improve the life of fellowship with God. In this way there can be mutual assistance and support between the church's confession and theological endeavor. Allegiance to the confession of the church is a condition for theology, but on the other hand theology is able to benefit the church's obedient confession as well. The danger however does exist that in the pursuit of theological inquiries a number of issues are proposed, and that in doing so theology exceeds its proper place in life. For then it seeks to occupy all of life and in fact becomes a substitute for a life of fellowship with God.

Scientific theological inquiry has also focused on the revelation of the incarnation of the Word. And it was in this that both of the above mentioned dangers were evident. For from the scientific realm several errors entered the church with respect to this truth. It became clear that also relating to this doctrine the mistake was made that people tended to look at this scientific examination as determinative for life.

It is almost impossible to sum up all the heresies that have developed in the course of church history with respect to this doctrine. There was Arius who denied that Christ was true God from eternity. According to him there was a time in which the Son of God did not exist. For him the Son of God was the Father's first and highest creature. That heresy threatened the life of the church, and was rejected at the council of Nicea in 325. After this Apollinaris came who did not do full justice to Christ's true and complete human nature. He taught that man consisted of spirit, soul, and body, and that the Son of God had taken upon Himself only a human soul and body, but that with Christ the human spirit was replaced by His divinity. This heresy also was condemned and rejected by the church at the council of Constantinople in 381.

When the church had confessed clearly that the Mediator is both true God and also fully man, believing minds turned increasingly to the question of how these two natures were united in the Mediator. Also with respect to this question two one-sided heresies entered the church. First there was Nestorius who considered the two natures as independent of each other and he could therefore no longer confess the unity of the person of the Mediator. In 431 at the council of Ephesus the church rejected this Nestorian heresy and taught the unity of the person of the Mediator. After that Eutychus gave up the distinction between the two natures, and taught the fusion or merger of the divine and the human in the Mediator and spoke of a single divine-human nature. At the council of Chalcedon in 451 the church maintained the distinction between the two natures of the Mediator. The result of this spiritual struggle was the formula adopted at the council of Chalcedon: *After His incarnation the unity of the person consists of two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence.*

After several centuries of struggling this is how far the church had come in her confession. Major heresies were cut off by these confessions and creeds. That does not mean however that with such insight the mystery of the incarnation of the Word was completely discovered. This did not happen then and it will never take place. For human minds it will forever remain a mystery that we shall never be able to penetrate fully, and there will always be something of an enigma about the incarnation. And should we ever think that we could fully comprehend that mystery it would surely mean the termination of our spiritual life.

Nevertheless, that this mystery continues does not make it impossible for the church to live by faith out of that truth, and with thanksgiving to acknowledge the Mediator as true God and man. Also the fact that this is a mystery does not cut off faithful reflection about it. And insofar as Scripture sheds light on it we attempt to understand Christ's incarnation. Furthermore, scientific theological consideration concerning this mystery is also not prohibited. Ever since the first centuries and also after the symbols then established, reflection about the subject did not come to a halt but the church and theology constantly have been occupied with it.

Believing, devoted reflection has focused especially on the unity of the Mediator's two natures. The question discussed was whether the Mediator did not take upon Himself an impersonal human nature. Proceeding from a particular personhood or the human ego, they believed that one could maintain the unity of the Mediator in no other way than in considering Him to have an impersonal human nature. After all, they viewed the human person or his ego as a third factor with respect to body and soul, as the master of the human nature which was distinguished as body and soul.

They accepted therefore that the Mediator, Who has a divine nature from eternity and is the second Person in the Godhead, also took upon Himself a human nature and a human person. This would result therefore in their view that the Mediator had two natures and two persons, and that in other words the unity or the oneness of the Mediator would have been abandoned, and thus constituted Nestorianism. But in order to avoid that they removed the person in the human nature of the Mediator, and spoke of an impersonal human nature, and thus the two natures were unified in the one divine person. Moreover they believed that at the same time they had gained something else, for an impersonal human nature means one without specific character or personality. An impersonal human nature also meant a general, generic human nature. And because Christ has such a general human nature, they believed, He could represent everyone and He could be Head of all so that they all could be included in Him.

This last reasoning, namely that Christ took upon Himself a general human nature, is patently erroneous. His human nature clearly was uniquely specific: He was a man and not a woman; He was a Jew and of the lineage of David. Moreover, the ability to be head and representative of all cannot possibly be found in the generality of the human nature. If one were to posit that one would also have to accept that Adam could be the head of the human race because he had such an impersonal and general human nature. The fact is that the possibility to be head of all and to represent everyone is related to the official position of Adam and also of Christ. Just as the mayor of a city at an official event represents all the citizens of that city, and all perform and act in him, and just as that does not depend on the nature or the person of that mayor but on his office, so also Adam as well as Christ could function as our head because of the office in which they were placed by God.

However, the question is whether the above mentioned concept of the person or ego is correct. Someone's self is not a third entity with respect to his body and soul, but much rather that entire human being. We tend to say 'so many persons' and mean then 'so many people'. A person is that individual himself – a human being as he considers himself to be an integral unity, and it is in this way that he presents himself to the outside world. Thus that person speaks of himself as "I" and "me." When we think of the human person in this way, the difficulties diminish somewhat. We must not consider that Christ took to Himself a human person, which would then mean in the concept of person here presented, that the Son of God adopted a person who already before then lived and who already before this spoke of himself as "I". For the Son of God became a human being through the conception of the Holy Spirit and by being born of Mary. From His very beginning the Mediator spoke of Himself as "I" and "Me", and when He did that He also considered Himself an integral unity, but then a unity that comprised the divine and the human in Him, and in this way He lived His life in the world.

The term "impersonal human nature" would not yet be so dangerous if one did not think with "person" as a third part with respect to body and soul. For when that happens they speak of an impersonal human nature, and the Mediator would be minus that third something found in all other humans, and therefore He would not be fully human *like His brothers in every way... yet without sin* (Hebr.2:17, 4:15). The unavoidable result of that concept would be that the truly human nature of the Mediator would fade in the awareness of the congregation. And instead of that only when one would first accept His impersonal general human nature could one confess Him as the representative of all. Surely, in this way God's people would lose their Head in heaven.

It is disturbing that so many in the church are so little aware that Christ even now as man, as the second Adam, is in heaven for us, and thus will live among us forever. And when we are not mindful of this, how can we then confess Christ as Head, since He can only be our Head as man, as the second Adam? Indeed, they will have lost sight of all human motives, also that of the human love in the heart of the Mediator. They will then no longer be able to envision that in Him also there was a human love that would increase in tension toward the end of His life, and that could be tested in Gethsemane. In this way they would come close to the idea already rejected by the church long ago that the Mediator did not have a two-fold will, one of them the human will. In harmony with the confessions the church contends that Christ has a divine and a human will, and thus also possessed a divine and a human love. On the other hand we need to retain the unity between these two as vigorously as possible. Behind the motives of His human love we must always acknowledge that of His divine love; for His human love was supported by and directed toward its greatest tension by His divine love. Everything in Christ is thoroughly human and at the same time completely divine. And thus we must always maintain the Redeemer's two natures and one person.

Nevertheless, with the above we have not solved all difficulties. For us there will always be a mystery: *Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory* (1 Tim. 3:16). We continue to look for background essentials that made the incarnation of the Word possible. And in fact this background is found in the creation of man in God's image; and behind this is the relationship in which God wished to place Himself to man and therefore in His covenant. Man lived at one time in covenant with the LORD and although he was completely dominated by God, yet he also had his own personal responsibility and in this connection, with his own motives of love he responded to and answered the LORD'S love. Even though the nature of humans has been completely corrupted by sin, the essence of man as a responsible creature was thereby not lost. And because this was not lost, the restoration of man's original nature was also possible. Thus the Mediator could take upon Himself the human nature in order to restore it. Of course we are not saying here that in the unity between the divine and the human in the Mediator there was not a much

more intimate relationship between them than what God had provided in the covenant relationship between God and man. When we think of the covenantal fellowship between God and man, we are looking at it merely as the background that made the incarnation of the Word possible.

It is in this way that our faith focuses on the unity in the Mediator, while at the same time maintaining the distinction between the two natures. Theology provides a helpful service in this for those who seek to live faithful confessional lives. The life of faith is not exhausted however in theological pursuit and needs to be distinguished from it.

### ***The Son of God***

We confess here that the Son of God came in the flesh, and what that means was already discussed in the last Lord's Day. He is the Son of God's love, in Whom God's love is revealed and given to us. Thus we read that *He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves* (Col. 1:13). In Jesus Christ God's love has appeared to us.

We are surprised that this love in the Son that we once shamefully rejected, came to us once more. The reason was that God did not give up His intention to convey His love in the Son to us because of our sins. Once He did give us His love in the Son, but in our rebellion and fall into sin we affronted especially the Son of God's love. Nevertheless, God has once more in His love appeared in this world in the Son.

However He appeared in a world then that was entirely estranged from Him. In fact, one could speak of the gospel in terms of "the gospel of the unknown God." Of course it was not as if that God Who came to us in Jesus Christ was not the Creator of this world, and it was also not as if He with His redemption denied the original work of His hands and would not restore this world, but in this sense that the Spirit of God was totally alien to the spirit of this world. Therefore John in his gospel, noting that even God's own people Israel did not accept Him, writes: *He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him* (John 1:10-11).

We no longer had any knowledge of God's love in the Son. There was not a single point of contact between Him and the world without God carrying out His restoring work in it, that is, without being born of the Spirit. We could not give any sign of recognition at His appearance. That is why He had to say: *the Son of Man has no place to lay His head* (Luke 9:58). With everything that affects the world the Son of God cannot find a single moment of rest, for all about which the people dream, all the ideals they pursue, and everything that they see as possibilities and as awesome, is diametrically opposed to God's love in the Son. He has said: *I am the light of the world* (John 8:12), that is, the love of God in Me is pivotal for life!

It appears that each day again we do not really grasp it – and not only a world that does not live out of faith is a stranger to it. For us too it is often difficult to confirm and embrace the idea that God's love is enough for us. We have so much misery that we rarely finish talking about it, while about God's love in the Son we barely say a word. Of course all our misery in life does not go away with the renewed appearance of God's love in the Son, and His coming apparently will always remain a riddle for us, something that frequently remains distant in our daily life. It seems that we lack the courage, the power, and the faith to say after God that His grace is enough for us. What do we know then yet of the power of God's love?

But that is not the only thing to be said here. The Word truly has become flesh, and in doing so He took hold of this flesh in order to change it and to sanctify it. For this reason there is the possibility and the reality of regeneration. And as soon as this takes place the love of God is no longer entirely strange to us. But this will be discussed later. However, that a certain connection comes to exist between the Son of God's love and us does not remove that the ambience, the atmosphere of this world is strange and foreign to Him and in many respects continues to be so.

Thus the question comes to us how God has dared to come so directly with His love in His Son to this world. For how often that appearance must have been denied and disavowed, neglected and rejected, even as it happens in our day! And also how it must have been considered as insubstantial and not as all-encompassing, and how it was compromised and

faith in that appearance adapted to a life that was turned away from God's love! Moreover, how greatly it is misunderstood, misapplied and misused! Thus the preaching of the gospel in the atmosphere of this world is still always a risk and a hazard, and as long as there is not the birth of the Spirit we find that gospel exposed to the opposite of what it wants to bring us. Perhaps nothing on this earth is as mishandled and abused as the gospel of the coming of God in Christ.

And yet God has come to us in Jesus Christ – God Himself, God directly, and God immediately. For He Who is the revelation of God's love is Himself God; in the Mediator we stand before God. And that He is the Mediator does not mean that He is sort of a liaison who is between God and man – less than God, but more than man. Christ's mediation is based on the fact that He is God and man at the same time. He is fully on God's side, and concurrently He is our representative. In the confrontation between God and man He has fought that battle within Himself in His bitter agony. In Him therefore we deal directly with God, and in Him we stand before God.

This revelation of Scripture is entirely unique in the world. With the unquestionably immense contrast between God and the flesh it is no wonder that people have not dared to live their lives as a direct meeting with God, but that instead they looked for beings and proper means that could fulfill the function of a mediator between God and us. Not only have they from man's side created a priesthood that could approach God on our behalf, but from the Gnostics came the idea that from God a number of descending beings came that formed a connecting link between God and us. This Gnostic attempt is even found in contemporary theosophy and among other modern movements. In this way the world came to be filled, in their view, with in-between beings that had something divine and yet were lower than God. These kinds of attempts to populate the world with such entities while seeking a certain mediatorship, is never found in Scripture's revelation about the mediatorship of Jesus Christ; and the one is totally foreign to the other. The peculiar and unique feature of Scriptural revelation concerning the mediatorship is in fact that in the Mediator we face God directly. And despite the estrangement between God and man, the gospel has dared to proclaim that in Jesus Christ God Himself is present.

At the same time that proclamation is also the wondrous foundation for our faith, for in the Mediator we have to deal with no one but God. It is a beautiful thing to be able to say to children: Your Mediator is your God! Thus we have an immediate and direct access to God because we know that God also became one of us, and in that way He atoned for our sins. We have therefore confidence and the freedom through faith to approach God directly. We understand that when by faith we have known His appearance in the Son of His love, nothing hinders us in coming to Him. That is the beauty in the revelation of Scripture by which everything that might come up in the minds of men is not only left far behind, but is also fully contradicted.

### ***Who is and Remains True and Eternal God***

With the words of the catechism *Who is and remains true and eternal God* we return to doctrinal issues in the discussion. The Son of God has not put aside His divinity in His incarnation, or any of His divine properties; and His divinity did not mingle with His humanity. He remained completely Himself, the *true and eternal God*. From the Lutherans came the idea that the Son of God had temporarily put aside His divine properties, or at least the use of them. Specifically they meant His attribute of ubiquity or omnipresence. They taught that the Son of God after His incarnation was no longer omnipresent, but was only present where He was as man. His divinity was not present outside of the humanity He had taken on. In this way according to the Lutheran concept, with the incarnation His divinity was limited to His humanity. They taught further that at His ascension the opposite took place, and that then His humanity was extended to His divinity, and His human nature received something of the divine attributes, specifically that His humanity could be present everywhere He wished. We plan to return to this last thought in connection with the discussion on the ascension.

In the present context we wish to focus on the first idea, namely that at the incarnation the Son of God put aside His divine properties and specifically His ubiquity, the ability to be present everywhere, or in any case the use of those properties. To support that concept Luther used these words of Scripture: *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness* (Phil.2:6,7) While the NIV translates: *made Himself nothing*, the actual meaning of the original is "emptied." And Luther interpreted that emptying as the putting off, or putting aside His divine properties.

Clearly what is involved here is the appearance, *i.e.* the visible manifestation. He has divested Himself of His divine glory. No one with the physical eye could see that Jesus was the glorious God, for the Mediator appeared in the nature of a humble man and only by faith could one see His glory – the glory of God’s grace in Him. Because He appeared here without any exterior glory and instead had put that away, He could pray in the high priestly prayer: *And now, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began* (John 17:5).

When in time to come the Mediator will appear on the clouds of heaven, not only will His glorified human form be revealed, but also His divine glory will be visible. And then also in that splendor we shall see the unity of the divine and the human in Him. It is impossible to suppose that the Son of God would divest Himself of His divine properties since God truly is immutable and eternally Himself. We cannot think of His attributes as separate from Him, so that at certain times He has them and at other times He does not. God does not only have righteousness, love, holiness, and omnipresence, but He is the Righteous One, the Loving One, the Holy One, and the Omnipresent One. And in that He is immutable. That is contained in the words: *Who is and remains true and eternal God.*

Of course faith is also involved in using and understanding these words. For not only has theology been busy with them, but also our faith has sought to hold on to them. With the incarnation, when God truly deigned to stoop down to us, became one of us and took the burden of our guilt upon Himself, He nevertheless remained Himself. He did not deny Himself, for that He cannot do. That God remained Himself in Jesus Christ became evident during His entire humiliation, but especially on the cross. For not only is it for us wonderfully grand and glorious that He could humble Himself so far and so deep for us, but how divinely magnificent is the Mediator on the cross in His defense and retention of God’s justice! And how divine is His love because of which He dared to die for the unjust! Thus also on the cross by faith we see His divine glory, even as He remains completely Himself.

In the fact that God remained true to Himself also in the humiliation of the Mediator we find the foundation of our hope. When a person bends down to help a fellow human being in need, he has to stay himself in order to be able to lift up the fallen one. Now this is only a weak illustration to say what God is for us when He condescends to our level. At times for us there is a certain fear in the fact that when God in redemption and in His coming to us remains so much Himself. We could sometimes wish that God was a little less divine. Would He then not be closer to us and would He not be more approachable for us? And yet when we find Him by faith we would not desire anything to be different, for the fact that He is God and is and remains divine and glorious constitutes especially the rock of our hope.

Also when He truly and fully meets us He is the mighty God, almighty in His act of redemption. There is yet something else here for us that we see as also indispensable for our salvation. Thus when God appears to us as Jesus Christ – God Who always is and remains Himself – that God also must mean everything to us and lay claim to all that is ours. The fact is that He cannot share His place with something or someone else and there must not be any separation between Him and us. Furthermore, there cannot be anything else from which we expect our salvation. Thus it is this way: it is either one or the other – that love which appeared to us in Christ is the complete fulfillment of our life and the solution to all our questions, or it continues to be foreign and unknown to us. With a lesser place than that such love is our all in all and relieves all our needs we can never be satisfied.

Therefore in Jesus Christ God must be for us the beginning and the ending, the Alpha and the Omega of all things. And He becomes that because He lays claim to all that is ours, for even as His gift is absolute so is His demand. He comes to us in Jesus Christ as the divine One Who can give all and Who can exact all. We accept or reject these two things and always conjointly. Thus we must not say that we often are prepared to receive all things from God, but are not willing to give Him all things. For when we are inclined to accept everything from Him it entails that we also give up every expectation apart from Him. And for this we are not always prepared, and then we are affronted by the gospel of the incarnation of the Word because in that incarnation God is still God.

For that reason some people are offended by the preaching of the church, which cannot preach anything else than that God is God, also in the incarnation of the Word. This cannot possibly be removed from the gospel in order to bring it closer to the people. The church is often accused that she has so little influence and is frequently urged to alter her preaching. And how often some have wanted to adapt the church’s message to the spirit of the people! The apostle Paul never wanted to go along with that. He wrote: *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God* (2 Cor. 2:17). He did not adapt the

message to the taste of his audience. And everywhere Paul appeared the awareness of the contrast immediately became evident, and with it the hostility and opposition.

God will never change – not ever! For the truth is that He can never be other than God. And because of this, the preaching of the church has offended many and driven them away. However, as long she is church she cannot preach any other than that God comes to us and meets us in Jesus Christ. It would be improper and wrong if the people of the world could tolerate the preaching of the church, and calmly associate with the Name of Jesus without going down into the bottomless waters of baptism without arising from there as newborn people.

### ***His True Human Nature***

We read that *the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us* (John 1:14). “Flesh” as used in Scripture has more than one meaning. Most of the time the word refers to a whole human being or to the human race, but at times it means man in his sinful or wayward condition, and on occasion man in his weakness and transience. Scripture notes that *the flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another* (Gal.5:17 NKJ). Here the word “flesh” refers to man’s sinful nature. The same is true in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: *Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit* (John 3:6). However, the words of Peter: *All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away* (1Pet.1:24 NKJ) do not point to man’s sinfulness but to his weakness and transience. It is in fact in this way also that we need to understand John 1:14, *the Word became flesh*, meaning that the Word took on the human nature in its weakness. The Mediator of course was without sin, but He bore the consequences of sin from the very moment of birth in the weakness of His human nature. From the very beginning He was subjected to suffering as He took upon Himself the form of a servant.

When we understand the word “flesh” in that way, we do not face an impossibility, for it would be incongruous to consider that the Son of God had united Himself with sinful flesh. After all, *what harmony is there between Christ and Belial?* (2Cor.6:15). However, it is not impertinent to believe that the Son of God in His humiliation joined Himself with our nature, and we see here very clearly the condescension of God in His act of redemption. And even considering God’s holiness, this union was not ruled out. God cannot exist in sinfulness; and yet it pleased Him to live in the humble flesh. Concerning this however He had spoken in the prophesies and foreshadowing of the Old Testament. And yet no matter how glorious the tabernacle and later the temple may have been, even to all these efforts of human hands imperfection would always cling, and could never be overcome and removed on this world. Thus the revelation that the Son of God took upon Himself the humble flesh gives us hope from a variety of perspectives.

At first we stand amazed at this condescension of God’s grace in the fact that He appeared in our humble flesh; but humanly speaking, was there any other revelation of God possible for us? We would never have been able to meet Him in His radiant glory, for in fear of Him we would then no doubt have fled away in terror. But now He presents Himself in the form of a humble human being. And yet even in that form we would never know Him without the renewing work of the Spirit in us; but when the Spirit opens our hearts and illumines our minds we are able to know Him in that appearance. In that form nevertheless we come to know Him as God.

Still, it affects us then as an overwhelming wonder that all the radiance of His love comes together in His appearance as a humble human. We learn that the longer our fellowship with the Mediator lasts, the more our eyes are opened for the truly divine and godly in Him. We begin to understand a little better the nature of the apostles’ elation: *We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, Who came from the Father, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14). With this we have also indicated that there is no other possibility to the knowledge of God than that we meet Him in that form in which He appeared to us in Jesus Christ. All searching for God outside of that revelation in Christ is a rejection of God and of the way in which He came to us. How great is our guilt when we reject Him in the appearance in which He wanted us to know Him!

In addition to this there is yet more for us to understand in that He was prepared and willing to take upon Himself our humble flesh. For from this it appears to us that in our abasement we are still susceptible to redemption. Thus as a result of the fall into sin our flesh is not corrupted irreparably, for otherwise the Son of God would not have been able assume it. We must pursue this further when in the following section in this Lord’s Day we see how He was born of Mary; here we

merely point to the idea. It often seems to us that our nature is not salvageable, and we cannot elevate ourselves above our sinfulness. It appears as if we live in quicksand, for when we want to raise one foot the other sinks yet deeper into sin. In these frequently futile attempts we should really look at the incarnation of the Word: our flesh has been taken hold of by the Son of God for deliverance, and there will be salvation, for His deed cannot have happened in vain. Thus in principle the redemption has already occurred by faith in the incarnation of the Word. And with that incarnation are necessarily connected His suffering and death as well as His victory in the resurrection.

Furthermore, we may then believe because of the incarnation of the Word that He will also change our nature so that we can know Him in His humiliation. After all, what would it profit us if God had appeared to us in this way if our nature alienated from God was not altered, our inability to receive Him was not changed, and our blindness to see Him was not healed? However, the fact that the Son of God took upon Himself our nature and for and in Himself purified it enables us to understand that also for us He will sanctify our nature unto faith and conversion. He took hold of our flesh in order that He would restore to us the knowledge of and fellowship with God. Through faith in the incarnation of the Word we may also realize by faith the change in our nature.

That means therefore the principial change of our nature already in this time. Thus not only in the coming age do we expect change and healing of our nature, but with believers a change is already a reality in the present time. To deny the possibility of such change basically amounts to the denial of the incarnation of the Word. In the Mediator our humiliated flesh is already in the present time sanctified to God. Therefore also, even though the humiliation remains for us, in principle the sanctification can take place. Through the power of Christ there is regeneration – a continually being focused on God, a change of the heart, and a renewal of life. Sometimes when we doubt that, we are able to overcome it by looking in faith at the incarnation of the Word. The fact that we are able to believe in the incarnation of the Word is proof of that change. And without that change we would not be able to know Jesus Christ, that is, God in that humiliated corporeal form.

Through faith in the incarnation of the Word we again see all possibilities opened up for the human life. We are able to live again, *i.e.* in this humble, lowly flesh we can live again unto God. Of course with this we do not deny the power of sin in our lives, or the contrary spirit in the world. Nevertheless there is in being united with Christ in faith the possibility to oppose sin. In doing so we do not begin with the regeneration, because faith always looks to and starts with Jesus Christ. And yet, we would not be able to believe Jesus Christ and all that we received in Him without regeneration. However, there is through faith in Christ a new possibility for life. We are able to present all our gifts and powers in the service of God again, and with this comes a developing use of those gifts and powers for the proper purpose. Scripture therefore admonishes us: *Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness* (Rom.6:13). The possibility for this is in principle provided through the incarnation of the Word.

Something else is yet connected with this as well. The Son of God, because He became like us in all things sin excepted, has come to us here where we live. We do not need to make efforts to be where He is, for while we live in the flesh He is also close to us. In the preceding paragraphs we already indicated that God did not need to approach us through various go-betweens, but that He Himself appeared to us in Christ, while from our side we do not need somehow to go beyond ourselves in order to meet Him. In fact He is next to us, for He has shared our life in His humiliation. Nevertheless, people have often tried to raise themselves above where they are, especially through asceticism, and by using the text: *Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!* (Col.2:21). Church history is replete with such efforts. And all of them contain a denial of the incarnation of the Word – the fact that He sought to share our debased life, and to sanctify it.

We do not need to escape from ourselves, even if that were possible; and we do not have to run away from life in order to find Him. We do have to flee from the sin in us and in our lives, and yet in the midst of our ordinary life He is next to us. And that we are able to flee from sin in our life is the result of the fact that He entered that life. There is no manifestation of human life, no expression, no endeavor that He in His incarnation has not wanted to touch. He is exactly there where we are, and if we should wish to do something to run away from ourselves and from life, we would be beyond where we would meet the Mediator.

Can we be ordinary, commonplace people, who let themselves be found in such a mundane life? It is not for naught that He spent time in the carpenter's shop. Nevertheless, things are sometimes so difficult for us because they are so plain and ordinary, and so close by. How often do we have to be told: here in your normal life, in your marriage, in your family, in your business, in your worries, in your daily problems, in your unfolding of life through the years, in your possessions and in your loss is God's grace, for in all of it Jesus is next to you and in your life He wants to reveal Himself to you. Should you want to look for Him elsewhere you will not find Him, for He has taken on your nature and your life.

It would appear that all of us have our difficulties with the incarnation of the Word, for we need to see both realities. On the one hand there is the true God Who came to us in Jesus Christ, while on the other hand there is our lowly flesh that He took upon Himself. Now we must connect these two: God in our humble flesh! We observe that there is already an indication of God Who condescended to speak with man before sin entered the covenant and that He talked with him in human language, associating with him as friend to friend. There is even greater need to speak of condescension when God after the fall into sin enters into covenant with man anew, continuing to relate to man and for this He uses all that is broken in the world. And again He uses the human language with its imperfection as a result of sin when He appears in a burning bush, when He meets with Moses under one roof in the tent of meeting, and when He makes the tabernacle and later the temple His dwelling place and fills this with His glory. In all of that was the prophecy of His coming in our humble flesh.

And now we stand before the reality that God in Jesus Christ has put His feet under the table of humans so to speak. That is the fact that is impossible to accept for us, and we reject it as incongruous, unless by that revelation of God's searching grace we have been led to faith. How could we ever handle this with a so-called historical faith? If we should but nominally consent to this Scriptural revelation without in it having received eternal life, we would not have understood any of it. For either we stumble and fall over this revelation or are gripped by it unto our eternal salvation. Thus Christ is *a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall* (1Pet.2:8), but He was also *destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel* (Luke 2:34).

### ***Conceived by the Holy Spirit***

In this Lord's Day we do not only confess one truth, but two. We confess here not only the incarnation of the Word as such, but also the manner in which this took place, namely by the conception of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the virgin Mary.

It should draw our attention that the conception of the Holy Spirit is denied by many who are nevertheless considered orthodox believers. Various reasons lead to this, among them that for some the absolute contrast that they assume exists between God and our lowly flesh is a disparity that could not be overcome. Our degradation would as such be unholy when contrasted with God, and this temporal and relative existence would in its temporality and relativity be the evidence of being contrary to God. But then this temporal life is irredeemable and not susceptible to sanctification. How could the power of the Holy Spirit have been able to join Himself with the life of Mary in her temporal life? And thus a union of these two is excluded with this way of thinking. However, behind this denial and rejection of the conception by the Holy Spirit one needs to go on to note the rejection of the incarnation of the Word itself. After all, how could God then come in our lowly flesh and establish a unity with it? If God and we in our humiliation are separated so absolutely, the very incarnation itself was an impossibility.

Of course God is utterly the opposite of us in our sins; and in that sense Spirit and flesh are opposed to each other and the Holy Spirit could never combine Himself with what was sinful in Mary. But in our humiliation, and in those consequences of sin God has been willing to know us, and the Holy Spirit has been willing to join Himself with the lowly life of Mary and God accepted her in her humble state. And thus we come face to face with the miracle that the power of the Holy Spirit is joined with this humble life. It is a miracle that this earthly life of ours is not excluded in the redemption, but that the Holy Spirit made use of it in the life of Mary. Here in particular God's power is fulfilled in human weakness. For us also this fact is entirely unbelievable unless we understand in it God's grace for redemption.

With this we come across another idea, for behind this rejection of Christ's conception by the Holy Spirit, as we noted above, they would need to go on to the rejection of the incarnation of the Word, since the incarnation and the manner in

which this occurred are surely very closely related. This may be seen in the words the angel spoke to Mary: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God* (Luke 1:35). Also according to the flesh the Mediator was not to come from an earthly father, but from God in order that He, in this unity of God and man in Him would be able to be called God's Son.

It is in this way then, even though He was a child of Mary and thus He had the nature of Adam, that He was not reckoned as a child of Adam. In the unity of the divine and the human in Him He is God's Son. Thus He did not receive through His conception and birth the guilt of breaking the covenant in paradise, for He was without original sin and therefore also without original corruption. He was born as the Holy One, and that was due to the fact that He in the unity of God and man could be called the Son of God.

One can say many things about the conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit, and for us it has several "religious ideas." However, we accept Christ's conception by the Holy Spirit not because it holds for us those marvelous "religious ideas," but because the fact is revealed to us in Scripture. Our faith does not hold on to and believe things because they have such wonderful insights, but it rests in God's revelation in His Word, which is truth. Many people and many children are saved because of the fact of the incarnation of the Word and of the conception by the Holy Spirit without knowing anything about those facts, and having understood nothing of those "religious ideas." Nevertheless the reality of the conception by the Holy Spirit is revealed to us, so that our faith would be busy with it and that by considering its significance it would be confirmed and established.

The Son of God has prepared for Himself a human nature through the Spirit. This act proceeded from the Father Who has sent His Son into the flesh. It is in this way that the conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit reveals to us that with the incarnation of the Word, and also with the entire work of redemption, all deeds are from God, from the Triune God and nothing is from man. And in this work of God Mary was only passively involved, even though by faith she responded to the words of the angel. It was God's love that turned again to us, and searching for us accomplished everything. That love of God in the Spirit made human lives which were of themselves unprofitable for God, useful for Him once more. God's love alone has made human life productive again. That it needed to happen in this way constitutes at the same time a verdict over all of human life: of itself it could not be profitable for God. And the conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit – the fact that it was so necessary – humbles us very deeply. For that God came in this way shows us that we in ourselves were not redeemable.

Although the conception of Christ was a deed of God alone, yet that conception is an historical actuality. The conception of Christ and His entire life on earth belongs to the history of the world, and can be narrated in the world's history books. And only those would object to this who would separate God's grace, God's love in Christ, and the history of this world in that sense that God's grace would be foreign and extraneous with respect to this history. But then it becomes an unsolvable puzzle as to why the Mediator did not suddenly come here as an adult man, and why instead He has experienced that history of conception and birth. His conception and birth mark His coming and appearance as historical.

Yet it is not an historical event like any other, and it cannot be explained by anything that happened before then, for it is entirely a miracle of God. In fact, it is this event that governs and influences all historical events, for it is in the conception of Christ that a new beginning has been provided. The calamitous flow of history implied in Job's question: *Who can bring what is pure from the impure?* (Job 14:4), is breached and broken by this happening. From Mary the impure, comes through God's miraculous intervention, the Pure One. And with this a new beginning and principle is provided, out of which the history of the world could be initiated anew, and thus this event has controlled and directed history ever since the moment of the fall into sin. That God could immediately intercept the world that was sinking away into sin with His covenant of grace, and once more could give it a history, finds its origin in the incarnation of the Word and all that is related to it.

Without that incarnation, history would have been impossible. This whole development – even if in it sin fights against grace and it appears that sin has gained the upper hand – can only be explained by the incarnation of the Word. Therefore this event with respect to its significance stands at the beginning of history and controls and influences it. All people and all nations will be judged with respect to their attitude toward this fact of the incarnation of the Word, in which God came anew with His grace and with His law.

Furthermore, because this fact in its significance stands at the beginning of the history of the world, it also occupies the central place in it. The generations before the Flood rejected the coming of God in the Redeemer and therefore they perished. After the Flood the developing humanity as a whole once more was unfaithful to the promise, and therefore with the calling of Abraham God lets the nations walk in their own ways. Nevertheless, the human race as such was spared in keeping with the covenant promise given to Noah, that the world would not again be destroyed by water. This promise also can be explained only through the incarnation of the Word: the nations even though they are hostile, are preserved until at the proper time they might come to the knowledge of God's grace in Christ.

Out of this we need to interpret God's involvement with those nations such as sparing them, as well as His judgment over Nineveh that despoiled and robbed other peoples. The reason and purpose of that preservation can be found in the incarnation of the Word. And after the coming of God, the world needs to be moved through the proclamation of it. All continuation in sin as well as the worldly organizations and structures for sinful purposes, can now be declared as a hardening and a revolt against the grace of God that came to us in Christ. Nothing in the world avoids relating to this central fact. Thus the incarnation of the Word itself belongs to the history of the world, and in it is also found at the same time the basis for the possibility of that history, and thus it occupies its very center.

This is how things are, even though it is not recognized and accepted by many. In a believing life a person comes to the incarnation of the Word and to all related to it as it were to a new beginning. Our life needs a new principle and we must be born again. That means that we need to go behind our own beginning, which on our own is impossible. The possibility for this however is provided in the incarnation of the Word. At that time by the conception of the Holy Spirit, from outside of the human race, a new beginning took place. Through being incorporated by faith into Christ, we also share in that new beginning. It is in this we find the explanation for all of our life, and that becomes also through faith its controlling *motif*. Thus there is the connection between the historical fact at the beginning of our Christian era and our life in the present century. The history that began with that fact continues now in our lives.

### ***Born of the Virgin Mary***

Through the conception by the Holy Spirit, that is through this intervention in the history of mankind from outside, the new beginning was given: and yet it is a conception in Mary. The Child that was to be born as a result of this was her flesh and blood. The Christ as Scripture tells us was born of a woman and thus the true seed of David. Viewed from this perspective He does belong to the human race, and He is truly one of us. But He is not considered to be in the covenant with Adam because He is God's Son, and yet He belongs to the human race with respect to His flesh and blood. In Lord's Day 3 we spoke about the distinction between covenant fellowship and blood or family fellowship. God wanted a covenant community with Adam as their head, and for that purpose He created the blood fellowship. However, that fellowship of blood is also possible without the covenant fellowship. Thus with Christ there was the relationship of blood with the human race because He was born of Mary, but there was no covenant fellowship with respect to the covenant with Adam between Him and the human race, because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

From a dualistic understanding people have always rejected that there would be a relationship of blood between Christ and us. Dualism postulates a complete contrast between God and this present world. And if in fact such an absolute contrast existed between God and the world, there could be no relationship of blood between Christ and the human race, because Christ would also be part of that disparity with God. A certain outworking of that dualism was evident with the Anabaptists. They did not deny that this world had been created by God at one time, but through the fall into sin it was according to them substantially damaged in its nature, and what was despoiled in nature could not be restored or repaired again. Therefore for them because of sin there existed at this time an insuperable contrast between God and the world. God cannot redeem this world any more, and thus sometime He will destroy it and create a totally new world in its place.

What God does through Christ, therefore, does not mean recreation but a new creation. And if there is an absolute and insurmountable contrast between God and this world as such, then also the flesh and blood of Mary could not be sanctified to the measure that from her the Holy One was born. It was in this way that the Anabaptists came to the theory that Christ had brought His body along from heaven, and that He was not really and truly of Mary's flesh and blood. Thus as soon as one accepts that insurmountable contrast between God and the present world, one will in the end arrive at the rejection of the incarnation of the Word, which means after all that Christ truly is the flesh and blood of Mary.

Over against this we confess according to the Scriptures that *since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death* (Hebr.2:14). That means that Christ shared our flesh and blood, and that He truly is the Child of Mary. How could He have been appointed as our Head if between Him and us there was not a blood relationship? Also in the covenant of grace there was behind the covenant fellowship the blood connection. The entire confession of redemption through Christ depends on the recognition and acceptance of this blood relationship between Christ and us.

With Christ's birth of Mary it is an established fact for us that Christ was truly human and became one of us. That means then also that He became a person to be counted along with the others. However, many times people have done this differently, proceeding from the concept that He had an impersonal human nature. Thus they contended that one could speak about Christ *as* human but not *a* human. He was God in the flesh, but He was not a human being like the others, and the number of people would not have increased with one at the birth of Christ. And when Christ went through the field of grain with His twelve disciples there were not thirteen people, but twelve men and the Son of God in the flesh walking through the field. People, they suggested, are counted since they are persons, and since He did not take upon Himself a human person He should not be counted among the people.

This consideration proceeds from the above disputed concept of person, as if the person were a third attribute with respect to body and soul. However, when the person is the human himself and if in fact he sees and considers himself a unity and presents himself as such in the world, the conclusion in this context must be a different one. Thus when the Mediator spoke of Himself as "I" and "Me," He considered Himself in His unity as God and man, and He could announce Himself as a human among other humans – even as He did. And when we speak about Christ as a human person we do that in agreement with the Scriptures. Christ said: *you are determined to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God* (John 8:40). In spite of the fact that in the Greek original this article does not appear, the descriptive subordinate clause: *who has told you the truth* does not leave any doubt that the translation *a man* is the only proper and correct one.

The apostle Paul speaks in the same way when says: *For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed* (Acts 17:31). Elsewhere Scripture speaks in the same manner about the man Christ Jesus: *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus* (1 Tim.2:5). Thus we must most certainly maintain that the Mediator appeared as a human among humans, as a man among men. How else could it really be possible? For if He were not a human being as others are He could not be first among people, Head of all, the second Adam. To deny that Christ is human would over time mean that the church would lose Him as their Head. But that He is man moreover expresses the fact that He not only is God's Son, but also as He constantly refers to Himself, the Son of man. Mary held Him truly as a human baby in her arms.

And thus we have returned to Mary. He was her flesh and blood. God has used her for the birth of this Son of man, and by faith she reflects on this in what we call the Magnificat or the Song of Mary: *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is His name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation* (Luke 1:46-50). We note that in the song Mary, through faith in this gracious deed of God, has returned to herself and in her song of praise she has also sung about herself. She notes that from then on all the generations will call her blessed. The result of the incarnation is thus also that we may consider ourselves and may have a wholesome love for ourselves, also in this humble flesh.

God has been mindful of the humble state of His servant, and with this Mary focused particularly on her low estate; but that was related to and connected with the status of the abasement of all flesh. God did not reject that humiliated flesh, but was prepared to use it for the birth of the Savior. And if God has not despised or disdained it, neither do we need to despise it. Naturally, Mary was not saved personally through the fact that the Savior was born from her, but was saved because she believably understood and accepted that God did not reject her in her humble state. And thus we are saved because we understand by faith how in the incarnation of God's Word the proof is given that He has not rejected our humble flesh but will regard us in our humiliation. It is in this way that we return to ourselves in a healthy love for ourselves in this unassuming and lowly flesh.

Some also reject this aspect of the incarnation of the Word and cannot understand the Song of Mary when they do not assert and uphold the absolute separation between God and us in our humble life. Once more we need to mention that Mary was not personally saved because the Savior was born from her. The veneration of Mary because of this fact alone finds no support or basis in Scripture. Her greatest glory is that she believed in Christ as her Savior. We read: *They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers* (Acts 1:14), and we note that Mary and the Lord's brothers are not mentioned at the head of the disciples, but they belong to the great multitude of believers. Thus Mary was saved through a faith that understood the incarnation of the Word as an acceptance of her and of all the believers in their humbleness. And we shall with her know the joy that God accepts and regards us in our humiliation.

### ***Hope for My Whole Life Through Our Mediator's Conception***

With the question: *What benefit do you receive from the holy conception and birth of Christ?* and with the answer: *He is our Mediator*, we need to focus especially on the will of Christ. His birth after all was not a fate that overtook Him, but an action that He in His searching love performed. He appeared in our flesh in order that He would be our Mediator. For the purpose of the incarnation of the Word is found in the mediatorship.

We mention in passing that the catechism apparently knew no other mediatorship than the one for deliverance. The consideration that the Son could also be the creation Mediator – according to us an entirely wrong term – is outside of the contemplation of the catechism. It knows only about a mediatorship in connection with the incarnation of the Word, and through this incarnation it was possible that He appeared as our Mediator.

Christ is the Mediator of the covenant. That means not only that He announced and proclaimed that covenant and through it laid claim to us, but He made that covenant between God and us possible. That took place because He reconciled us with God. In fact, the last words of this answer point to that: *with His innocence and perfect holiness covers, in the sight of God, my sin, in which I was conceived and born*. The Mediator is the Mediator of atonement. With Christ we find the mediatorship however in a unique and peculiar form. He does not stand between the two parties because He would be less than God and more than man: He is God as well as man. He is as much the one party as He is the other. In Him God's love comes to us, and He also represents us before God. Thus He brings both parties together in Himself. That is the wondrous way in which God proceeded in this mediatorship.

If He would represent us before God, He would have to be our Head in the covenant. The relationship that embraces Him as Head and us as members is the covenant relationship. Thus He is Head in the same covenant of which He is also the Mediator. For how could He be Mediator of the covenant if He were not also our Head in that covenant?

As our Representative, as our Head, He was the surety or guarantor for our guilt and He atoned for it. Therefore He could restore the fellowship between God and us. And no restoration was possible without that atonement. Through the incarnation of the Word by itself therefore the reinstatement of that fellowship did not take place, for the incarnation as such was not the propitiation of our sins. Nevertheless, we need to see the incarnation in connection with the atonement He would accomplish in our flesh. And thus He came in our flesh in order that He would reconcile us with God. From the very beginning He considered our sins as His responsibility and took them upon Himself, and thereby vouched for us right away. He could do that because He was conceived and born without sin. This is what the catechism reflects: *and with His innocence and perfect holiness covers, in the sight of God, my sin, in which I was conceived and born*. That of course does not mean His holy conception and birth themselves were atoning for us, but it does mean that already from His conception and birth He acted for us and was our surety.

Through His holy conception and birth our conception and birth in sin is covered in God's sight. Thus when God looks at us He no longer regards our unholy beginning but the holy origin of Christ's life. With us as we are in ourselves, there is not one hour in our existence in which we are pleasing to God. When seen in this way we *were by nature children of wrath* (Eph.2:3 NKJ) even from our very conception. God was against us from our very beginning, and therefore His favor would not be ours for our whole life either. Now however, to say it this way, our conception and birth are made new in the conception and birth of Christ, and God views our beginning in life in the light of that holy origin of Christ. Therefore God's pleasure goes out to us from the very beginning of our life.

Now, however, we may confess the opposite of the observation above, namely that there was not an hour in our lives that in Christ we did not please God, for from the beginning we were children of His good pleasure. That gives us hope for our whole life. For however much we still sin, that relationship of favor that existed from the beginning of our lives between God and us does not change. Therefore also our lives for God will not be futile, and because of this we know that we will not have lived in vain.

Therefore also in this section the attention is focused on atonement. Of course there also needs to be a regeneration of life, even as there must be sanctification. That sanctification however is the fruit of our faith in atonement and reconciliation. When we proceed from God's good pleasure for our lives, we can get ready to do battle against sin. Everything also in this Lord's Day is dependent on our faith.

In this connection we still want to point out that in the second answer first of all *our Mediator* is mentioned, and after that *my sin*. First we see the fellowship of God's people, and after that my part in the reconciliation or atonement. How do I know that I have part in the grace of the Mediator? Because I believe in that covenant of which Christ is the Mediator and in which He is Head, through which God has also claimed me and has sealed that to me. When I surrender myself to the claim that God through His covenant with His promise and demand places on me, then I know that I belong to that covenant communion, and I know that I belong to that Mediator and share in the atonement through Him.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 15****37. What do you confess when you say that He suffered?**

*During all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end, Christ bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race. Thus, by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice, He has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life.*

**38. Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge?**

*Though innocent, Christ was condemned by an earthly judge, and so He freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us.*

**39. Does it have a special meaning that Christ was crucified and did not die in a different way?**

*Yes. Thereby I am assured that He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me, for a crucified one was cursed by God.*

***The Sacrifice of Love***

The incarnation of the Word and what is connected with it, namely Christ's victory over sin, has made the history of the world possible. Without the intervention of God's grace in Christ the curse after the fall into sin immediately would have impacted all creation fully and thus history would have discontinued suddenly. The covenant of grace, based on the work of Christ, and through which God's grace in Him is waging war against sin, made a new arrangement of history possible. The possibility of world history is based on the miracle of Christ's coming. And this being the case we should not be surprised that the entire world history is accompanied by miracles: at times of special revelation through miracles leading to the blessing in Christ for this world, and for the revelation of that blessing in times afterwards by miracles for its application to the world.

But then, we should not be surprised either that the whole life of Christ is one great wonder. This is not the place to describe the nature of a miracle, for that should take place with the discussion of providence. In general however we can say about it that God through that miracle interrupts and overcomes the ordinary course of events which would be drifting toward ruin and destruction, in order in this way to bring about deliverance. Therefore the whole life of Christ on earth is a wonder, not only His resurrection and ascension, but every moment of it. Nothing in that life can be seen as merely a development of natural factors used by God, but every moment signifies an act of God, an intervention by Him in world history for its deliverance.

Everything that we confess in this Lord's Day and the next must be viewed as a miracle. This already begins to surface in these words of the present Lord's Day, namely that Christ bore the wrath of God *during all the time He lived on earth*. This is the miracle – most extraordinary and redeeming – that He bore God's wrath every moment and thus reconciled life. We do not have to give a life's description of Jesus, as we might do for any other person concerning his life's development, for in Jesus' life we see with everything in it the action of the Mediator for reconciliation.

In Him God is busy reconciling the world to Himself, He as the Son of God, as God Himself. Thus Scripture reveals: *For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross* (Col.1:19,20). However we

see Him suffer not just as man, and we see His divinity not just sustaining His humanity in that suffering, but we see His every action go out from Him as God. Even as He caused Himself to be born, so also as God He constantly yielded and gave Himself as man for that suffering. Every moment He has rendered His soul, *i.e.* His life, as a guilt offering.

We shall never be able to realize what God experiences of our sins, or even how they affect Him. However, this can never be a suffering for God. Yet, whatever God experiences in relation to our sins He returns to us. He does that in keeping with the covenant of love He established with us. Thus by that action He upholds for Himself both the justice and the honor of His love that He once conferred upon us. It is in this way that we experience God's wrath, which is the background of all the suffering here on earth. The question asked here is: *What do you confess when you say that He suffered?* The essence of what is asked here concerns the wrath of God. The question of course is whether we see that background! Suffering bothers us and we react against it, while often our attitude reflects that we have not pondered about what was behind it. What we see is the suffering itself, but not as the expression of God's anger, and then we do not bow before that suffering as revelation of our guilt. Scripture must teach us what the meaning is of suffering and therefore the answer is written as it is.

It has pleased God nevertheless to enter into that suffering Himself in Jesus Christ, and to take it upon Himself in the covenant of His grace. His love motivated Him in this. And this love is in the first place self-love, for He desired to glorify Himself in the redemption of people. It was for this that He undertook the enormous task of entering into that suffering Himself. Thus He glorified Himself in the eyes of all who are able to see this by faith. And because of this especially all questions about God's righteousness in the suffering are cut off. In this questioning of ours we are totally ashamed because God in Christ placed Himself at the center of that suffering. Moreover, motivated by that love for Himself, He was also willing to turn Himself in that love to man again. Thus He wanted to have men share in His blessedness once more, and that love has led Him also in accomplishing this work of redemption.

Thus we look at Christ as God in undergoing that suffering. And yet He endured this suffering as man. We see Him also in His human willingness and in His human love. In the surrender of His heart He has borne this suffering as man. Yet His human love because of the unity of His person, had His divine love as background. All the emotions of His human heart found their deepest motivation in His divine love.

In His suffering we need to focus especially on His love, for His suffering by and in itself would not atone for the sins of the world. That suffering itself did not have atoning power. But the compelling and motivating love through which He bore the suffering willingly every moment, made it a sacrifice of atonement. Surely with every instant of the life of Christ on earth we face the extraordinary. That He took the burden of suffering upon Himself willingly and of His own accord constituted atonement – opposing thereby the course of events in order to deliver the world. For us every moment of that life takes on inestimable value, every minute signifies an act of deliverance.

The Son of God unremittingly yielded Himself to that suffering as a human. His love made this suffering a sacrifice of reconciliation and atonement. By His love He dedicated that suffering to the Father, in order that the Father would be glorified in the redemption of the world. In that obedient work He enjoyed the delight of the Father. And that is why when the heavens were opened on one occasion, the Father could say: *This is my Son, Whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!* (Matt.17:5). Such pleasure existed for the Son because of His obedience, while at the same time God's wrath oppressed Him for our sake. Those two of course do not have to rule each other out.

Thus we see the suffering that brought atonement especially as an action of the Son. Nevertheless, in this we also need to take note of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. The Father has given Him for this purpose; and from the very start the Spirit of God's love worked in Him. And thus the work of redemption is a labor of the Triune God. Therefore Scripture can say that *God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them* (2 Cor.5:19). In His self-surrender we need to focus on the love of Christ, so that we are able to believe in Him as suffering for our reconciliation. We do not believe in a theory of substitution and transfer of guilt – we cannot believe in it.

However, we believe in the love of the Mediator for our redemption. That love is in the first place a love for God, namely that He gave Himself over to that suffering so that God would glorify Himself in the redemption of the world. That love however was then for God's sake also a love for His own whom the Father had given Him. He loved them because and so that He would redeem them. In that love we may believe, and therefore we are able to see Him in His substitution for

us, and can also see Him as He took upon Himself our guilt and the wrath that oppressed us. Through that faith in Him we are liberated from our guilt.

### ***The Wrath of God***

Did Christ actually suffer all the time He was on earth? And did He suffer redemptively during all that time? Like every other person but in a special way Christ experienced adversity and suffering, but in all of it did He suffer it vicariously, and as a surety? Or did the suffering with which He reconciled us first begin in Gethsemane?

This last view, defended by very few, certainly is rather arbitrary and mechanical, for the guilt of sin would then have come upon Him only on that last day. We need to consider however that He did not only suffer for us but that He also lived for us. To say this doctrinally: Christ was not only passively obedient in His suffering, but He was also obedient actively, that is, obedient to the demands of the Lord's law. The demand once placed before Adam was the demand of faith, the commandment to accept by faith the favor that God gave him, but then it was also an obligation to live by faith. For God required an answer to His love in the action of a reciprocating love in the whole of his life. Adam was then the representative of the human race. And in him the entire human race was to dedicate its life to the Lord.

However, now that the life of the human race has become a life of defection and apostasy – now the Head of the race must display a life of dedication and devotion to the Lord. Thus the dedicated and obedient life of the Lord Jesus Christ now is in the place of the unfaithful life of the whole human race. For Him however in His submissive life the suffering was connected as a necessity from beginning to end, for He did not only have to do and give what God had required of Adam and the entire human race, but He also had to atone for the apostasy of life. Therefore He had to demonstrate His act of obedience in a life in which He was separated from God's favor, but where instead God's wrath oppressed Him. Only in this way could His whole obedient life be a substitute for our disobedient life and cover it before God's face. If that whole life was lived for us, then it would have to be also a life of suffering. Thus that entire life became a sacrifice of atonement. And it certainly is a great comfort for us that our entire, in itself apostate life, is lived for us in that of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that we with our sinful life may hide behind His obedient, suffering life.

In what then did that suffering *during all the time He lived on earth* consist? Christ had His sorrows and His disappointments like any other human being, but in a particular manner and in a special measure. For He saw His life's work of the gathering of Israel fail. All His labor ended up in all His disciples leaving Him so that in the decisive hour He stood alone. We must not consider all of that – and there is much more to present – by itself. Rather, Christ experienced something different. He has seen that God had forsaken the human race, and He noted that not only in the suffering of people, but even more in their sinfulness. That we are flesh, prone to all evil, and thus subject to all kinds of suffering, demonstrates how God's favor has been turned away from that flesh. For if that favor would have been granted us, we would not only have peace with God, but also the power of sin would be broken in us. In fact, when God's favor is conferred on us again, flesh no longer remains flesh.

But now God has indeed put Himself in the place of the human race that had been given over to sin and suffering, and has dared to appear as their Head. It was in this way that He has also taken upon Himself *the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race*. As our Head He has truly become like one of us, and thus *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us* (2 Cor.5:21). Thus since He was like us, and therefore God's anger also struck Him, He too experienced the disappointments that befell Him. In those disappointments and disillusionments God's wrath against the sin of the whole human race personally affected Him. All the sins and all the suffering of mankind therefore impacted Him specifically and uniquely. And all of that as manifestation of God's wrath came upon Him daily.

This experience of Christ has not even been entirely unique. To be sure, it was so in the measure and manner in which God's anger affected Him. However, in the suffering of all believers we recognize the wrath of God against the whole human race. We do not only see our own sins and we certainly do not limit our outlook to this, but behind it we are led back to the sin of all flesh, to which we also belong. That the human race of which we are a part is able to sin and must sin, and as a result of this suffers so much, and that it was consigned to this by God and thus forsaken by Him, becomes the deepest cause of our sorrow. The Word and the Spirit do not leave us alone and by ourselves, but lead us back to the community of the human race. And thus we also experience something of the *wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race*. For although we are restored by Christ into God's favor and have the joy of this through faith, we also

realize that we belong to the flesh and experience therefore the wrath. Faith is always a struggle, and always expresses its 'nevertheless' over against the experience of the wrath that is revealed from heaven.

Thus Christ has borne the burden of God's wrath in full measure. Of course there was a culmination in that suffering during His agony on the cross. That is why the catechism can say that *especially at the end, Christ bore in body and soul the wrath of God*. He came to know that wrath ever more fully through what He observed and was subjected to, and submitted to it increasingly with greater consciousness. However, over against continually suffering the wrath, there was also God's pleasure because of His obedience. Yet Christ enjoyed this life with all its treasures, for that also belonged to His obedience. And in addition to this God testified from heaven more than once about His pleasure in Him. Only at the end of His life those expressions of God's favor were withdrawn and He experienced only wrath. Of course that does not take away that the sense of wrath was there during His entire life. In fact, He testified to this when He said: *I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!* (Luke 12:50).

We normally speak of the state of Christ's humiliation that began with His conception and birth. With this we consider then that someone's state is his legal status. A judge in a legal opinion determines someone's state, namely that the person is either in the state of being guilty or innocent. It was in this way that Christ appeared before God in the state of being guilty because God assigned our guilt to Him. Now we must not forget that with the task of being Mediator as He devoted Himself daily to this, and as He daily persevered in it, He conducted Himself as our Head. Every day He submitted Himself willingly to the burden of God's wrath. And thus His suffering was an ongoing and unceasing task. In His willing compliance He also submitted to Satan's temptations. The first temptations after His stay in the wilderness led Him to forsake His official status and motivated Him to seek for Himself God's favor. In those temptations He learned even greater obedience, as He did also in the temptation in Gethsemane. Here in particular His obedience was tested, because even before He surrendered Himself to the final suffering He experienced God's full wrath, so that He was surprised and began to be terrified and already then seemed close to death.

Thus we see His whole life as a willing, a voluntary sacrifice. And for this sacrifice He continually prepared and equipped Himself, also when many a night He was alone praying. In those prayers He invariably and intentionally offered His life to God as a voluntary sacrifice in order that it should propitiate our lives before God and thus for us it would be an *atoning sacrifice*.

### ***The Only Atoning Sacrifice***

Is there in all suffering an indication of anger, a revelation of wrath? There is after all so much suffering that believers endure because of their faith. Was there evidence of wrath in the suffering of the martyrs? And when the antichrist at some time will persecute believers, must we then see in that suffering a revelation of wrath? The souls under the altar – they who have died because of their testimony of Jesus – do not speak at all of a suffering under God's wrath. They only cry out: *How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?* (Rev.6:10). With them certainly one cannot speak of sustaining the anger of God for particular sins. Instead there is the reporting of their faithfulness and their bearing witness of Jesus. Also Job in the Old Testament was conscious of needing to be faithful to the Lord.

Nevertheless, there is in that suffering also an expression of wrath. After all, the believers on earth also belong to the human race, that is, flesh – they also are still flesh. And the wrath of God always assails that flesh. It is true that they through being born of the Spirit have become spirit themselves, and as such they are conscious of God's favor; but as far as they are flesh, the wrath of God is still directed at them. Such wrath is not negated because they are reconciled in Christ. Their sins are not counted against them in terms of their condemnation, but yet there is an expression of wrath from God as Father. That is why they need to pray daily for the forgiveness of their debts. Thus for them there still is wrath because they are flesh. And even in the suffering that they experience from God's enemies because of their witness for Jesus, they still see the revelation of wrath for them according to the flesh. When a father disciplines his son it is an act of love, and yet at the same time he expresses his anger. Scripture tell us: *My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son* (Hebr.12:5,6).

There is thus for believers also a sustaining or suffering of God's wrath, because they are still flesh. Of course the unbelievers experience the wrath of God much differently. And although they do not recognize nor accept that suffering as an expression of His wrath, for them it is however a prelude to the eternal suffering of God's wrath. There are many kinds of suffering under God's wrath in the world, but that suffering is atoning for none of the people, and certainly it cannot be considered as an atoning sacrifice for others, let alone as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. What then makes the suffering of Christ to be *the only atoning sacrifice*?

Already earlier we noted the fact that the suffering of Christ was the sacrifice of love from Him as God and man. In that love He dedicated His sacrifice to God in order that God would glorify Himself in the deliverance of the world through that sacrifice. It is therefore totally out of the question that God merely wanted to see blood and that in this way His wrath would be satisfied. When people raise this criticism about "blood-theology," they surely have completely misunderstood the Scriptures! The Father and the Son have acknowledged and accepted each other in this suffering. The Father sent the Son for this very purpose, and appointed Him as Mediator and Redeemer.

Therefore this pathway of redemption went out from the Father. For this He sent the Son as the second Adam since Christ did not from Himself or on His own take on the task to reconcile the world. If He had not been sent by the Father and authorized by Him, this sacrifice would never have been able to be an atoning sacrifice. For first of all what was needed was the Father's mandate. In addition to this, what was needed was that the Son in love for the Father willingly took that suffering upon Himself, accomplishing it. Furthermore, related to this is the fact that in love He carried out the mandate of the Father. It was in this way that the Father and the Son have acknowledged each other in this sacrifice, and thus it could be *the only atoning sacrifice* that takes away the sins of the world. No other suffering could possibly be compared with this suffering of Christ.

Now this suffering is the sacrifice for the atonement of the sins of the whole world. Christ has borne the burden of *the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race*. After all, He has been appointed as the second Adam, the new Head of mankind. Of course there could never be any question of the reconciliation of individuals. God created a human race and they can only as mankind in its entirety be reconciled with God. Individual, independent, self-sufficient persons do not exist on this world. Persons exist only in relation with the human race, and it is as such that God sees them. There is one, single guilt that presses down upon the whole of humanity. The sins surely are personal, but they are the consequences of that one sin of the entire human race in Adam, and they are the unavoidable results of the fact that the whole of humanity is taken captive by that one debt. Therefore it is not merely that the sins of this or that person are atoned for, but that the debt of the whole human race must be taken away.

And yet not all people share in that atonement. These are spiritually outside of the humanity that was restored in Christ. According to the flesh they belong to mankind, and as long as they are in this life they share in the many blessings that come to the human race for Christ's sake; but according to the spirit they do not belong to it. We must not forget that the blood fellowship is not the most important, but the covenant fellowship. God established at that time the covenant fellowship in Adam, and for this He created the blood fellowship. Unbelievers participate in the blood fellowship of the restored humanity in Christ, but they have no share in the covenant fellowship which in the covenant of grace was restored in Christ. As noted, they do share in the many blessings conferred upon humanity in the covenant of grace. But for them this nexus of fellowship with the human race is only temporal, as Scripture reveals: *But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more* (Ps.104:35).

If the suffering of Christ is to be a sacrifice of atonement, then the fellowship of the Spirit with Him in the covenant of grace is also necessary. Christ has been appointed as Head of mankind, but that relation between Him and the human race must through faith also become effective in order to belong to Him. Thus the personal deed of faith becomes evident in the members of the new humanity. The catechism states on the one hand that *Christ bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race*, but observes on the other hand that *He has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life*. And of course with *us* the believers are meant. Thus the catechism focuses on both the fellowship of the human race, as well as on believers as members of that race.

Here the question comes: How do I know that this sacrifice of atonement that has been offered for the sins of the human race is also effectual for me? Most of the time such a question seeks to be a distraction and the questioner is no longer

busy with Christ and His atoning sacrifice so that by faith he can focus on that, but instead he concentrates his attention primarily on himself. Of course it is necessary that one knows himself to be a member of that new humanity; but one is a member of that humanity through faith – and thus as a believer. And how shall we ever be able to be aware of ourselves as believers if we do not start with faith? That means then that we through faith submit ourselves to Christ as the atonement for the sins of the whole human race. Only when we do that are we able to come to know ourselves as a believer and thus a member of the new humanity. And all confidence to be able to surrender ourselves by faith in this way to Christ is found precisely in the fact that He has been appointed for the reconciliation of the whole human race. In the covenant of grace God has been willing in Christ to engage the whole humanity, and thus we may not only, but we must surrender ourselves through faith to that deed of God in Christ.

It is then that we understand that with His suffering as with the only sacrifice of atonement, *He has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation*. Precisely because He wished to redeem and restore a community, He did not merely deliver individual souls, but He redeemed humans body and soul – humans because they are body and soul, are able to participate in that fellowship. In the future of Christ that new fellowship will be seen through the resurrection of the body. And that such a future will be for us the restoration of body and soul proves however that already now our life in the body cannot be in vain or futile. The fact that we as body and soul are redeemed from everlasting condemnation means that our living in this time is not purposeless. Already now the judgment is taken away from us, and therefore we know that every day of our life in this body has its value. For us therefore life in this time is no longer without purpose. Christ has delivered us from that because He opened up for us the perspective of a new future.

The answer speaks positively when it states that Christ *obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life*. Over against wrath the catechism places grace, and for us this constitutes forfeited or guilt-forgiving favor, *i.e.* grace. Of course, in this life we still experience the wrath of God. For even as with Christ bearing God's wrath did not exclude that during His life on earth He still received a number of expressions of God's love, so also the fact that we share in God's favor does not exclude that we also experience at times His wrath. And when His wrath has passed, God's favor in Christ does not cease. Even as a father in anger chastises his child and this can be at the same time a gesture of his love, so also when God He makes us experience His anger He considers us in His favor in Christ. His favor for us is unchangeable since Christ once bore the full wrath for us, and that wrath of God against Him was caused by our guilt. It was in this way that He atoned for our guilt by bearing for us God's wrath, thereby obtaining God's righteousness for us. And because there is favor for us now, fellowship with God is also possible; in that fellowship with the Eternal One – a fellowship that can be offended and disturbed, but not breached – we have everlasting life.

### ***Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate***

In the Lord Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world stood opposed to each other. This fact became very clear and evident throughout the entire trial. The Lord Jesus Christ referred to His kingdom when He said: *My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would fight to prevent My arrest by the Jews. But now My kingdom is from another place* (John 18:36). And Pilate alluded to the kingdom of this world when he said: *Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?* (John 19:10). Clearly these two kingdoms are sharply opposed to each other.

This contrast however should not lead us to a misunderstanding with respect to the kingdom of God on the one hand and the kingdom of this world on the other. We must not conclude from this that there exists a contrast or antithesis between God's kingdom and the kingdom of the world as such. For quite easily one could come with this line of reasoning: With Christ's trial the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world were antithetical to each other, for at that time it became evident how the kingdom of Jesus Christ and the earthly kingdoms relate to each other, and thus the earthly realms are permanently condemned, for between them and the kingdom of God stands the cross. Should we view matters in this way, we would have misunderstood the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world, as well as the meaning of the cross of Christ.

Christ says that His kingdom is not of this world. To be more precise we should translate “not *out of* this world.” That means that it does not come up out of this world corrupted by sin. In this world the spirit of self-preservation at any price dominates, because man has become his own god and his own right is for him the most important. It is clear that out of

this world the kingdom of Jesus Christ cannot possibly have come, for in that kingdom the justice of God is paramount, that is, the justice of God especially as it triumphs in the redemption of the world. Justice and grace do not exclude each other therefore, but in that kingdom they go hand in hand. The revelation of grace in that kingdom is at the same time the revelation of justice. For it is also the kingdom of righteousness – righteousness in the relationship between God and man as well as between the people themselves. Christ enjoins us: *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you* (Matt.6:33 NKJ). With this we have ascertained that His kingdom is revealed not only in the future but already in this time. That righteousness must also become evident in the kingdoms of the world, in their structure and in their internal relations.

With the kingdom of this world we understand the organization of life as it has emancipated itself from God, and as it has become a god to itself. Here man is driven by the spirit of self-preservation at any price, and the power of the state in particular becomes like an idol and force is honored while justice is trampled under foot. It was this spirit that animated the pagan Roman Empire, which we should see as an expression of the kingdom of this world. That does not mean of course that the power of the state necessarily needs to take on that idolatrous character, or that the state necessarily must rule with violence and denigrate justice. Thus the earthly kingdoms cannot necessarily be equated with the kingdom of this world. Nevertheless, civil government readily assumes an idolatrous nature and the state easily comes into conflict with the kingdom of God. Yet there is not a fundamental disparity between the kingdom of heaven and the earthly state as such. If one accepted such a contrast, it would be difficult to confess that the institution of government was from God.

It is also difficult to maintain that the condemnation of Christ by Pilate as the worldly judge has placed the cross permanently between the kingdom of God and the state. Even as Christ has often been for the atonement of individual people who first rejected Him, so the cross of Christ is also for the reconciliation of society. As a result of the cross, the earthly realms also now need to be consecrated in the kingdom of God. Especially because of the cross it is impossible to envision a contradistinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the earth as between the realm of grace and the domains of the law. For through the cross also the law of the Lord has gained its true authority.

The reconciliation of all of life through the cross of Christ places the governing authorities and the state itself before the obligation to be of service to Jesus Christ as King in His kingdom. This is not the place to work out the specifics as these apply to political life. What is involved here is only the relationship between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of the earth. We must observe however that precisely the sanctification of national and governmental life encounters the greatest resistance, and that government and the state, as Scripture predicts, will withdraw themselves increasingly from the obligation toward sanctification. The nations will be ever more self-sufficient and state power will become more and more idolatrous and demonic. And when Christ returns, His condemnation will be particularly for the kings and rulers. They will then be condemned because in their governing and leadership they have not been willing to let themselves be sanctified, and have not submitted themselves to Him. We read: *When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her* (Rev.18:9).

### ***His Condemnation and Our Acquittal***

When the catechism states that Christ has *freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us*, because *though innocent, Christ was condemned by an earthly judge*, it indicates here that Christ in the sentence of Pilate has borne God's judgment for us. In the unrighteous sentence of Pilate, Christ heard God's righteous and just sentence.

The question then arises whether indeed in an unjust sentence of a worldly judge God's verdict actually comes to us. In times when the church was persecuted that question was discussed repeatedly, and it was a burning issue. If the decision of the worldly judge must always apply as the judgment of God, then we must never try to circumvent the implementation of the sentence, however unjust the sentence may be. Therefore then an attempt by the martyrs to escape from prison would always be forbidden. It is clear that this deduction is improper and unacceptable. It would of course be possible to maintain that a secular judge's sentence is unjust, and then conclude therefore that the attempt to escape is entirely lawful and justified. However, when escape is impossible and the sentence is carried out, we are still able to see it as an act of God. That is possible when we consider something else in addition.

For how did it happen that we are subject to authorities who are often unjust in their judgments? The truth is that once, in the beginning of our history we did not want God to be King over us and with the fall into sin, in rebellion we rejected God's kingship. And now God has subjected us to numerous authorities that frequently judge unfairly. Thus it is that in that unrighteous sentence in history there is also God's judgment with respect to our rebellion. For believers it becomes clear when considered in this way, that there is thus no reason for revolting against God when in this world we suffer injustices from numerous ruling authorities.

The question must be asked here whether believers must see the injustices they suffer as a judgment from God. After all, Jesus Christ has *freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us*. Therefore we answer this question in the same way as the question whether we can still speak of a wrath of God for believers. That is, we are set free from the eternal judgment of God; but nevertheless we are still flesh and in the measure we are flesh, God's judgment applies to us even though that judgment has a different character than that which comes upon unbelievers. For unbelievers it means punishment but for believers it is a chastisement. Just the same, the believers hear in that injustice the "guilty" verdict that God speaks against them.

In a very special sense Christ heard God's judgment in the unrighteous condemnation of Pilate. The judgment of God in history, even as it comes to us through unjust judges, was recognized by Christ in the sentence of Pilate, but for Him it did not mean chastisement but condemnation. All of God's judgment under which this history suffers came to Him in Pilate's pronouncement. And how His soul must have trembled under this! It is in this way then that the sentence of Pilate must be regarded as a distinct aspect in the suffering of Christ.

The result of this was that He *freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us*. The intent here is to refer to the final judgment. We must not lose sight of the fact that the final judgment constitutes the completion of the judgment in history. World history is already in part the judgment of the world. God's punishing hand is also in history, for God is the God of history. Already now on the one hand there is a judgment in history that will be completed in the final judgment. But on the other hand there is also a being set free from that verdict in history – a knowing the approval of God in history in as far as that this is carried out by the church, and a knowing of God's pleasure in the history of our own life, a joy that will be revealed in Christ's verdict on the last day. Already in this time therefore we may know about acquittal through this suffering of Christ, concerning an acquittal that is repeated every day. Thus we may live in the pleasure of God through which we are liberated for the service of Him in all our works.

### ***The Curse of Being Unproductive***

The cross has become a symbol. And it is hard to find a better symbol for Christianity. For it speaks to us in many ways as our Mediator was raised on the cross. In general one can say what the catechism says about it: *Thereby I am assured that He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me*. The cross speaks of the curse, but also of the removal of the curse over the world. However the outworking of that curse can be seen in various ways.

The cross shows us an ascending, vertical line interrupted by a horizontal crossbar. We think of our many inspiring aspirations that are all thwarted in their effectiveness and vitality. We are condemned to impotence and our life that is filled with desires is doomed to ineffectualness. It is in this way that the cross reflects the curse of barrenness that has come over life. The strongest idealism as well as the most tenacious perseverance avail not a thing; in the end life appears to have been in vain and futile. Not one of us is able to attain what we imagined or hoped – in fact, we could fulfill none of it. This is what life is like without the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, for then it is a complete failure.

This whole impact of the curse was also suffered by the Lord Jesus Christ. His whole life's work was afflicted with unproductiveness. With His capture all forsook Him. Of the great crowds that once followed Him, no one remained. That was however only the exposure of His life's failure – on the cross He was handed over to that curse when the Father forsook Him. What had He really accomplished in all His life's labors that He had carried out for the Father? On the cross should He not see that failure in this light: He could never attain anything because the Father was not with Him?

The reason for our failure after all is found in God turning away from us. We have been abandoned and therefore are doomed to barrenness and unfruitfulness. Under that curse Christ was fastened to the cross; and there was not any way in

which He could escape. For the curse is truly effective and definitive. There is no possible way to escape from it. And the inexorability of that darkness had to come upon Him. He has borne the bleakness and unfruitfulness of the whole of human life in Himself. All the centuries of unfruitful striving have come upon Him. In His own suffering on the cross He has realized the significance of that curse over the whole human race, and in the darkness He thrashed it about for hours without being able to escape it, while on the Father's part there was not a single sign of solace or vista of hope.

It was thus that *He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me*. And because of this we are assured that the curse against human life has been removed. Thus we ask: How is it possible that people, seeing the suffering of Christ, can still speak of the cross standing between God and this world, and thus of the unfruitfulness of life on earth for God? Has that suffering of the curse by Christ then accomplished nothing, or is the result of that only intended for the next life? But nevertheless He has truly taken the curse of this life's unproductiveness upon Himself in order to deliver it from that curse. Through believing in the cross we may surely understand that our life and work in this time is not in vain, because it is in the Lord. For at His time this life will be raised in the day of Christ, and then it will be evident that it was not in vain. Not only has the life of believers been delivered from the curse of barrenness, for through the cross of Christ the whole of the history of the world has again received meaning for God.

All of that history was necessary so that God would be able to pour out on His own people the fullness of His grace. The hope and expectation of the complete fulfillment and enrichment of life does not put us to shame, because already now the love of God is poured out in our hearts, and thus through God's love our life is no longer sterile. The apostle Paul writes: *And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us* (Rom.5:5). And yet it cannot be denied that the curse still works in the life of the world and in measure also still in the life of believers. Blessing and curse still wrestle with each other in the present time.

We must surely not overlook the curse, for the realization of it leads us to the cross of Christ, and then we can understand better what Christ went through on the cross. In addition to living with the curse as we learn through faith in Christ, there is however also the experiencing of the blessing that we receive through faith as well. Everything depends on believing in the cross of Christ. Without faith we will never admit the curse, but instead we will continue to struggle. And although we invariably have failures in our life, we are not able to admit that we are under the curse of unproductiveness. Looking at the cross of Christ makes us admit the curse. There is interaction: when we look at the cross of Christ we can admit the curse of life; and when moreover we by faith then also experience the curse in our own life, we begin to understand Christ's suffering on the cross.

Again the question could be asked: How can I be sure that He also took upon Himself the curse that was on me? How do I know that I also share in the deliverance of the curse? I cannot infer that from my own life, for that it is not unproductive I can only see through faith. Without faith I know absolutely nothing of being profitable before God. Therefore we must go out from the fact that we believe that Christ suffered for the curse, and that faith assures me that His suffering was for me too.

We can only see Him as Head of the world in God's restored covenant, and when we see Him in this way we understand that when the curse is put on Christ it affects me. And then I may believe because I must believe; and then I may believe that it was also for me, because I must believe that. Then also for my own life I can say with the apostle Paul: *I resolved to know nothing ...except Jesus Christ and Him crucified* (1 Cor.2:2). Escaping our doubt is always founded on accepting the claim that God has placed on us because He has given Jesus Christ as our Head.

### ***The Written Code of Our Sins***

It was not accidental that the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified on a hill. The Romans by preference placed a cross on a hill or at crossroads, for everyone should be able to see the one crucified. The criminal was exhibited on the cross, and the disgrace of the crime was proclaimed in this way so that everyone should turn away from the criminal and with that also from the crime. It was in this way then that the Lord Jesus Christ was displayed in the shame and disgrace of our lawlessness. Isaiah describes Him as *despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not* (Isa.53:3). Everyone had to sever relations with Him completely. On the cross He was forsaken by all. Already being led outside of the gates of Jerusalem

in this connection must have evoked many things in Him, for with this He was being cast outside the fellowship of His people. Even the Gentiles wanted to have nothing to do with Him. Standing as it were outside of the world He descended into this disgrace and indignity.

The Form for the Lord's Supper reflects the significance of the cross when it states that *He even let His blessed body be nailed to the cross that He might cancel the bond which stood against us because of our sins*. The apostle Paul writes: *having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross* (Col.2:14). On the cross He was overwhelmed by the judgment of the law and thus cast outside of all fellowship.

We must not see this merely as a doctrinal construction. In all these measures of men Christ recognized the Father's actions. Thus with the suffering of Christ we are dealing not only with what people were doing to Him. And we need to focus not merely on the fact that the world placed the cross between itself and the Christ. And surely we must not see it in this way that the cross is placed permanently between Him and life of the present time, since He has cancelled the written code of our sins by nailing it to the cross, so that therefore fellowship with Him and life is again possible in this present time. We must focus especially on what the Father did in this. The guilt of the sins by which all men for ever were excluded from all fellowship and communion, and were condemned to eternal separation and isolation, had been placed on Him by the Father. Also because of this Christ suffered what was inescapable. Also this interminable isolation became a bitter reality for Him. Thus the tenor of the events is not in those happenings themselves, but what the Father is and does in them. Also from this isolation there was no escape.

Through this suffering in which He was cast outside all fellowship He canceled the code of the law's curse that was against us. Because of the fact that for Him all fellowship was disturbed, He restored the fellowship and communion. Therefore He has also become the Head of the new fellowship in the sense that this could originate with and from Him. Thus we are able to know each other and possess one another for ever in Christ. And there is a communion, a fellowship in Him that eliminates all divisions. For believers this fellowship in Christ embraces every other fellowship on earth and sanctifies it. Beyond and above all our joy in the fellowship on earth is the delight of the eternal communion in Christ. Also the fact that outside of the circle of believers fellowship is possible is due to this suffering of Christ. Paul kneels before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *from Whom His whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name* (Eph.3:15), referring to all fellowship mentioned in heaven and on earth. Outside of Jesus Christ not a single fellowship is conceivable.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul applies this specifically to the relation between Israel and the Gentiles. He writes: *For He Himself is our peace, Who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross* (Eph.2:14-16). Thus also through the cross of Christ a new fellowship of nations emerges. Out of those nations He gathers one nation or people, and in that one community all the peoples are redeemed with the retention of their own character. To acknowledge that through faith signifies a victory over sinful natural hostility. It is in this way that Christ has established true peace.

If a person does not have part in that eternal fellowship as restored in Christ, he will one time be cast outside of all fellowship. After all as Jesus said: *if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?* (Luke 23:31). On the road between Jerusalem and Golgotha Christ prophesied about these matters: *Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for Me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then 'they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'"* (Luke 23:28-30). Outside of Christ the written code of our sins has not been canceled, and eternal isolation is waiting.

### ***A Crucified Person is Cursed by God***

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (Gal.3:13). This quotation refers to God's command: If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death*

*and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance (Deut.21:22,23).* In Israel only a person who had already been executed was hung on the wood.

In that raising of the pole the significance of the curse was revealed. The criminal was rejected by the earth and not accepted by heaven. Instead heaven and earth turned against such a criminal. But in the promised land he could not remain hanging any longer than evening, for in this land the blessing was revealed how heaven and earth were reconciled with one another. Over against that blessing, such an object of a curse would demonstrate sin and therefore needed to be removed from sight before nightfall. Only one instance is known to us from the history of Israel where the one who was hung up remained on the tree for months on end, and that was in connection with members of the house of Saul. In that time, however, there was a curse over the land of Canaan which was evident from the drought that God brought on the land because of the sins of Saul.

When someone was cursed it meant that all things would be against him, and even prosperity would not be a blessing for him. Thus in the crucifixion of Christ on the cross, heaven and earth were against Him: the earth rejected Him, and heaven refused Him. He was not only forsaken by all and everything, but everyone turned against Him. And in this God Himself turned against Him, and He became an enemy for God, and God Himself opposed Him. In that span of time Christ suffered all of God's enmity against the whole human race of all centuries. And experiencing God's enmity was for Him the most excruciating! He encountered the fierceness of God's wrath, and that was a suffering which for Him meant eternal death.

Through this enmity that turned itself against Christ, God has reconciled the world with Himself. And because of this God can now once more be favorable to the world and care for it in everything. And in particular this applies to believers who instead of a curse, now receive a blessing. All things are now for their benefit because in all things God is for them. Over against the curse there is now the blessing, and to be blessed means that all things favor us. God will even turn adversity to our good. The apostle Paul wrote: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose (Rom.8:28).*

Without a doubt blessing and curse still struggle with each other in this world. God's curse on all expressions of sin remains and more than once it is possible to point to that curse. Frequently God turns Himself against people and He can break down the work of their hands. Even if God often opposes also His own, we cannot speak of curse then, for the curse is taken away from them. The fact that God at times and in various ways is against them will be a blessing for them, for through that they will be preserved as spiritual persons.

With respect to unbelievers conversely, we cannot truly speak of a blessing in the full sense of the word. God may indeed give them prosperity and use them in the outworking of His counsel, but that will nevertheless not be an eternal blessing for them. For as a result they raise themselves in pride against God, and thus it will also appear in due time that even in that prosperity they were cursed. Only in a restricted, temporal sense can we speak of a blessing with respect to the life of unbelievers. For God loves even His enemies as long as they are in this life; and the Savior said to the crowd about loving their enemies: *that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt.5:45).* As long as they live as part of the human race here on earth, they share in the universal blessing that God confers on mankind and on this world because of Christ's suffering. Thus in this life we see the functioning of blessing and curse. The result however will produce the complete blessing earned by Christ; but as David envisioned: *The wicked will perish: The LORD's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish-- vanish like smoke (Ps.37:20).*

**THE TRUE FAITH**  
**S. G. De Graaf**  
 Translation by Richard Stienstra

## Lord's Day 16

**40. Why was it necessary for Christ to humble Himself even unto death?**

*Because of the justice and truth of God satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God.*

**41. Why was He buried?**

*His burial testified that He had really died.*

**42. Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die?**

*Our death is not a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life.*

**43. What further benefit do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?**

*Through Christ's death our old nature is crucified, put to death, and buried with Him, so that the evil desires of the flesh may no longer reign in us, but that we may offer ourselves to Him as a sacrifice of thankfulness.*

**44. Why is there added: He descended into hell?**

*In my greatest sorrows and temptations I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ, by His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which He endured throughout all His sufferings but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.*

### ***The Death of Christ: The Completion of His Obedient Life***

With the death of Christ as referred to in question 40, we have to think of what is commonly called the natural or physical death. Behind this is His spiritual death when He was completely forsaken by God. Our Lord's Day focuses on that spiritual death only in question 44, and yet we cannot really leave this entirely out of consideration here, because death is one. We do distinguish between eternal, spiritual, and physical death; and yet there is but one death which came into existence with sin. For Scripture death is never anything exclusively physical, and it always has a spiritual dimension. It certainly is impossible to declare that death is merely physical, and with such a view we would never be able to answer the last *Why* of this Lord's Day. There is a spiritual *motif* in death, as Scripture states: *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law* (1 Cor.15:56). Thus the separation from God that came into being due to sin provides the final explanation for the so-called natural death.

There is a spiritual sense to that "natural" death, as Scripture almost always indicates. With the loss of the body all contact with the present world is also lost, and the one who dies is cut off from the land of the living. That is entirely unnatural when we think of nature as it was once created by God. No one has ever succeeded in satisfactorily explaining death as a physical process. Death contains the element of punishment, of divine affliction, and produces a certain sensation of fright and even horror that can rarely be fully overcome. The loss of contact with this present world is the consequence of breaking the fellowship with God. Everyone of us still experiences something of that aspect of death,

even though only Scripture provides us with the necessary insight into its background. Thus to be cut off from the land of the living is a manifestation of being cut off from God's fellowship. In this way death is singularly one.

Especially with the suffering of Christ it is necessary to keep in mind the unity of death, for otherwise no answer can be found to the question of whether it was not enough that He was forsaken by God when He died a thousand deaths, and whether it was really necessary that He also had to undergo a "natural" death. Yet He sustained that death, and also His dying was a manifestation that He was forsaken by God. Thus, also with respect to that, He has fully taken our curse upon Himself.

Especially with Christ we stand before that abnormality of death. How could He Who had true life, Whose food it was to do His Father's will – how could He die? When we think of Him as He lived among those of Israel, as He spent nights in prayer with the Father, as He acted in fellowship with the Father, healed the sick, blessed and taught, we see that death was entirely abnormal. How could He, Who in all of this showed that He possessed true life, die? And moreover, it would also not have been possible for Him to die, if the connection with the Father was not been broken first. That happened when He was forsaken by God. It is said that it is more difficult for a child to die when the mother is present, for the relationship with the mother infers the connection with this life. In any case, for Christ the fellowship with the Father also included the affinity with this present world.

But in it all we clearly see the Father's action in the death of Christ. God has forsaken Him and with it the possibility of dying was provided. That forsaking was for the Father not arbitrary, for Christ appeared as our Head and had taken the responsibility for all our sins upon Himself. And yet, that forsaking contradicted the whole nature and life of Christ. He always had responded to God's love with a perfect reciprocating love, and thus what would be more natural than that He would always remain in God's fellowship, and that He would also retain the connection with this present world? Thus it is evident that in the death of Christ the hand of God is noticeable. For He Who truly lived has been handed over to death. And in that death He was regarded by God as the atoning sacrifice.

As the catechism states, this took place in accordance with *the justice and truth of God*. At the beginning of history God had assigned death in its full extent, thus including "natural" death, as the punishment for refusing to obey Him in faithful obedience in His covenant. And thus the justice of God's covenant functions behind this death. Therefore death is so irresistible and continues its triumphal pursuit in this world. Christ was also subjected to this power derived from justice, and thus death and the justice in it have ruled over Him as well.

Moreover, the truth of God functions in death – that is, His faithfulness to His Word once given, whether as a promise or a threat. Thus behind death is also the power of the Word of the Lord that is hastening to its fulfillment. Death therefore is in such a great hurry because in it is the compelling force of the Lord's Word. Christ, Who had the true life, is delivered over to that death in which functioned justice and the Word of the Lord. From this the vicarious nature of His suffering is evident. He has been put in our place, and as such He was there in the state of being guilty before God. Thus He was made to be sin for our sake, as Scripture says: *God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Cor.5:21).

All of this proceeded from the Father; and yet the Mediator Who is both God and man has from His side willingly given Himself for this. As we elaborated on that with the discussion of the suffering of God's wrath, He was engaged in that as God and man, namely that as the Son He took that mandate upon Himself in order that in its fulfillment God would glorify Himself in the reconciliation of the world. And also as man the love for God and for the world impelled Him to carry out this deed, and thus this suffering from His side was a voluntary sacrifice. The Father and the Son have acknowledged each other in this sacrifice, and the Son devotes and dedicates it to the Father. That also takes place in His last words spoken as He was dying: *Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit* (Luke 23:46).

Speaking these last words and what He accomplished with that was truly mediatorial. For His spirit constituted His life as it was focused on and yielded to God – that life in which He had been obedient even unto death. He dedicated that life to God with those words as a voluntary sacrifice, in order that God should judge whether it was worthy to receive as a substitute for the life of His own. We can hardly consider the fact enough that it was His innocent life as sanctified and dedicated to God that He with those words yielded to death. *Unto death* after all meant at the same time into His Father's hands; He yielded it voluntarily unto death, completing with this His obedient life and placing it then into His

Father's hands for the atonement of our sins. When we see how He surrendered His innocent life unto death, we are able to understand how it has been a propitiation and atonement for us.

### ***The Burial of Christ***

To the question *Why was He buried?* the catechism answers: *His burial testified that He had really died.* If one were to consider matters from our perspective His burial would not truly provide the proof *that He had really died.* When we calculate the time more precisely, we conclude that He was in the grave a little more than thirty six hours. He had been buried on Friday evening around six o'clock, and on Sunday morning He arose at about six o'clock. Because the Jews count a part of the day as one full day, Scripture is able to speak of three days and three nights. Thus Christ was in the grave three days. This is not really evidence that He had truly died, for on occasion someone who had been apparently dead for more than thirty six hours revives. Scripture provides us with another proof that He was truly dead: *One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe* (John 19:34,35).

However when we see His burial from God's side, it does provide us with evidence of His actual death. God has given Christ over for burial in order to convince us that He had truly made Him enter death. And for the one who reads Scripture in faith there is no doubt that He suffered death to pay for our guilt.

The question can be asked whether there is any vicarious satisfaction in His burial. Can this burial really be considered as part of His suffering? After all, there was no suffering for His body which was dead, and as to the spirit He was with the Father. The answer however is that we need to see man as a unity. There is an evident presence of a person in the body, but when that body is placed in the grave, it is obvious from this that the grave dominates that person. And even though Christ was with the Father according to the spirit, yet when He was still living He had surrendered Himself to death. Therefore His burial belongs to His suffering, and in it He has borne the indignity and shame of our sins.

Also in the burial God's judgment achieves His *justice and truth*, for He had said to Adam: *By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return* (Gen.3:19). This decaying of our body, and with it our entire life's evidence in the body – this destruction of what we were and what we did, this erasure of our existence on earth – is a judgment for sin and an unbearable indignity.

Even as the suffering of the wrath and curse of God was an actual reality for Christ, so also is this suffering. When He yielded Himself to death and to the burial, the full gravity of God's judgment over all of human life must have registered with Him. Without God's grace, everything is yielded to destruction in the sense that there is no remaining result, and all that is not done in faith is destroyed as by the wind. The futility of human life must have pressed down upon Christ in the hour of His death. And that was not taken away by the fact that in His spirit He went to the Father. That Christ in His spirit was with the Father would not have been blessedness, and would have been completely impossible, if His whole life on earth in the body would have been in vain. He did go to the Father believing that He would be restored in the body, and that the result of His life on earth would be revealed and evident. But that does not take away that He still stood before that impenetrable barrier of being given over for burial and that therefore the suffering of the human futility of life came upon Him. God's judgment concerning our burial and all it meant was suffered by Him. And He willingly surrendered Himself to this also.

With His burial Christ also wanted to take away that judgment from us. And as a result of that we will not escape the grave, but the meaning of things however no longer is in what they in themselves would be, but rather in the relationship of God to us in these matters. Thus what applies to Christ applies to us as well. Not the burial itself, but God's judgment in it constituted for Him the suffering when He submitted Himself to it. In the same way the grave itself for us is not everything, for the question here is really what God means to us in the burial. For us the judgment is also taken away from the burial, and it has therefore an entirely different meaning for us. It no longer signifies for us the elimination of our life's accomplishments in the body, but instead represents a temporary hiding place for us in the womb of the earth, so that when we are resurrected from it, we shall be glorified with that new earth. God's grace continues on into the grave and our hope is not removed from us by the grave.

Thus we tend to develop a measure of attachment to the place where someone is buried. For in our faith and hope we do not forget someone's body, that is his life's accomplishments in the flesh, but instead by faith we remain linked to it. It becomes evident therefore that we, as was the case in Israel, value an honorable funeral. For such a funeral expresses our hope and expectation of the resurrection of the body, and thus the restoration of someone's earthly life. The complete opposite of this confidence is articulated in the cremation of the body, especially when in keeping with what the person's will prescribes, the ashes are taken by ship on the sea and thrown into the wind. With this a very clear indication is expressed that no restoration of one's life on earth is expected. And with this the whole significance of Christ's burial is denied.

### ***The Descent Into Hell: A Forgotten Chapter***

In the Apostles Creed the confession of the burial of Christ is followed by *He descended into hell*. Christ's descent into hell is treated in answer 44, and it is understood here as *His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which He endured throughout all His sufferings but especially on the cross*. The catechism follows Calvin in this explanation, and thus we have been protected from the fantasies the Greek Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, and the Lutherans have produced concerning these words. That there could be so much difference of opinion about this formulation must apparently be found in the fact that the original meaning was lost.

Since the descent into hell follows the death and burial, the ancient Christian church could not have meant what the catechism understands here. The ancient Christian church apparently confessed with these words the entrance of Christ into the realm of the dead. And it would not have been so serious if this idea of the ancient church had fallen by the wayside, if that did not also mean that a Scriptural concept had been lost with it.

In Scripture the word "hell" repeatedly has the meaning of the realm of the dead. And with that we must not think of a particular place, since not all the dead are gathered in a single place. For immediately at death there is the separation, whereby some are with Christ and others are under judgment. The realm of the dead indicates the compilation of the dead as in a similar way we speak of a plant kingdom and an animal kingdom. Thus entering the realm of the dead has especially a negative meaning, for one no longer belongs to the realm of the living, and one is no longer in the community under the sun. The idea of the domain of the dead therefore is connected with that of the grave, and thus we can speak of a descent into the realm of the dead. With this we should not forget that the realm of the dead is presented in Scripture as a power. As the grave devours, so the kingdom of the dead conquers the world. We read in Scripture: *I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades [that is, the realm of the dead] was following close behind him* (Rev.6:8). Over against this power Christ has given the promise: *I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it* (Matt.16:18).

What therefore is the sense of the realm of the dead and the power it possesses? Entering the domain of the dead, that is, no longer belonging in the land of the living means one is given over to oblivion. In this is expressed that there will be no more any remembrance of a person in the land of the living, and that instead his name will pass away with him. At least that is the curse originally given with entering the realm of the dead. Of course outside of God's grace there is also a resurrection of the dead, but that however does not mean an escape from the realm of the dead, but rather that without God's grace someone is abandoned to eternal oblivion; and then hell first begins in the real sense of the word.

That the church lost the idea of the realm of the dead was the result of the fact that she turned away from the earth in contravention of Scriptural revelation. The church saw the earth almost exclusively as the place where sin was rampant and in control, and her longing was for heaven where believers would enjoy complete salvation and glory. The church did not renounce or abandon the confession of the resurrection of the dead, but that confession had very little content for her and offered her very little comfort. It was entirely outside the church's actual expectation that a restoration of this present life, even sanctified and glorified, needed to happen. She was entirely satisfied, though unscriptural and individualistic, with the salvation of "the soul" going to be with Jesus.

Scripture speaks about our life in this present existence and of course not without revealing to us its continuation in the life after the resurrection of the dead. However in this present life we must find eternal life in the fellowship with God.

That communion must be reflected in our life in the body. The apostle Paul puts it this way: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me* (Gal.2:20). That fellowship with God can only come to full development in this life in the body and in all the relations that we have through it. In the present time this is hindered by sin, and becomes possible in perfection only after the resurrection of the dead. Dying implies also a loss for believers when seen from the perspective of the development of life. They as well are taken out of the land of the living, and Scripture is focused on that realm.

Christ also has entered the realm of the dead, however. And when He yielded Himself to death, He had suffered all the consequences of sin in this respect, namely that we are abandoned to eternal forgetfulness or oblivion. He must have realized fully at that time the curse that has come over human life. And what it entailed from God's side must have overwhelmed Him. It was certainly the intent of the Pharisees and their scribes that He should forever be forgotten, and that is why they asked Pilate to place a guard at His tomb and to seal it. The news that He had risen must not get out among the people. We hear their disappointment and annoyance when they say to the apostles later: *We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood* (Acts 5:28). It certainly was evident then that His Name had not perished with Him.

Because Christ also submitted Himself to this suffering He received power to open the gates of the realm of the dead. And He did that for Himself as He returned to the land of the living. Through the Spirit He has contact with those who still live in this present life. That was evident in the forty days during which He still was on earth. Those forty days are of such great significance because they point to the relationship that presently exists between Christ in heaven and the life of this age; and that relationship is possible because He makes His own to be born again.

The result of this victory through Christ over the realm of the dead is thus in the first place that the life of believers in this age is not unproductive. In the land of the living we are in fellowship with Jesus Christ able to bear fruit. It is thus that Scripture is focused on and intended for this present life. Necessarily connected to that fruit bearing of believers in this time however is that they in their death are not surrendered permanently to the realm of the dead, and that their name does not cease with them. Also for them Christ has opened the gates of the realm of the dead and once they will have an eternal name among the redeemed.

When we understand Christ's descent into hell in this way, we do not need to discuss at length the views of the Greek Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, or the Lutherans. They agree on this that they all go out from the idea that Christ immediately after His death "in the spirit" descended into hell. Scripture does not mention such going of Christ into hell, and especially not the account of the gospel where we read: *Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." When He had said this, He breathed His last* (Luke 23:46). Also the apostle Peter does not write that way: *He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison* (1 Pet.3:18,19). These words according to their contextual sequence say that at His ascension He proclaimed His victory over the enemies. The church came to those kinds of interpretations because she no longer understood the original meaning of the words of the Apostles Creed.

### ***The Dying of Believers***

Through Christ's suffering and death the judgment is removed from our dying. When we by faith know the vicarious, guaranteeing, and atoning suffering of Christ, we cannot doubt in this respect. For us death is no longer a payment for our sins, for the nature of punishment is taken out of it for us. Seen in this way death no longer causes us to be afraid; at least it should not do that any more. Keeping our eyes fixed on death we say: *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ* (Rom.5:1).

That reconciliation also brought us the renewal of life and such renewal entails the path of dying and rising again. The old man was crucified and died in us and the new man rose in us. The old and the new man do not mean two parts of our existence, for we ourselves die as the old man and we ourselves rise as a new man. It is the same person who experiences that change, and it is a transformation in the lives of all of us.

Of course this is a transformation in a spiritual sense, and what is meant is a spiritual dying and a spiritual rising – a breaking down the alliance with sin and the establishing of the relationship with God in Christ. The change in that spiritual sense is a reality and affects our entire existence and life, all the issues of our heart. The negative side of this is that the transformation is not fully complete unless our flesh, our life in this body, is judged. We experience in God's guidance many disappointments and much of what we undertook soon begins to crumble as we encounter much suffering. In all of this, God's judgment comes to us as the old man, and He seeks to use all of it in order that we should die to the old man.

Thus there is indeed a judgment of God with respect to our sinful nature, a judgment that does not leave us during our whole life. And in some sense we can be glad about that, because we know that the old man has to die, and we readily resign ourselves to this matter. However, we can only do that when we see the resulting fruit of it, namely the emergence of the new man. With this however, the suffering, the fear, and the terror is not taken away from us in the dying of the old man. And for us it is a constant affliction that our deliverance must come in that way.

Only when we fix our eyes on Jesus and in fellowship with Him in His dying and resurrection are we able to surrender ourselves to this willingly. This means that for us such spiritual dying and such suffering in the flesh does not have the nature of the punishment of an eternal judgment. Instead, for us this judgment on our sinful nature is one of liberation. Nevertheless we suffer under it when time and again we find certain avenues solidly closed, so that we learn to walk in different paths. And it is an ongoing distress for us that in our lives everything must be broken off in order that we should build anew from the ground up.

That judgment for us while we are in the body is terminated with our death. We know that it is necessary in order that our spiritual renewal would be completed. Therefore we are able when seen from that side to yearn for death and cherish the wish expressed in the words: *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (Rom.7:24). That does not take away that in this dying there is contained a suffering and a judgment over us because of our sinful nature. And viewed from that perspective the fear and terror for death remain, for it is the last enemy as Scripture says: *The last enemy to be destroyed is death* (1 Cor.15:26). As far as we are concerned we continue to be afraid of death and reject it. And we would wish that the coming of the new man could take place by means of a total renewal from within and without the agonizing transformation.

However, the way of personal development is an impossibility, for the effect of sin in us is too deep and too broad, so that our heart and the entire life in the body is corrupted by it. What is necessary is a totally new approach and the old life must be left behind while a wholly new method must be followed. Even those who are left at the return of Christ need to be changed: *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed* (1 Cor.15:51,52). That will not merely be a change as would have taken place if man had not fallen: a change from a lesser to a greater glory, a change from a sinless "natural" to a "spiritual" life. But for believers who still live at the time of Jesus' return, the change in one moment will also have the character of transformation, even of catastrophe.

In that transformation which is necessary, a judgment remains and we are fearful of it. In that sense for us the dread has not been taken out of death. And yet we long in it for the dying off of our sins. Many times believers who were dying have wrestled with this; and when the terror recedes entirely, their joy is immense. Then by faith they reach out in anticipation to the situation in which they will serve the Lord without sin. And the delight about that enables them willingly to leave behind them the ties that bind them to this life, because they see that the being "in the body" of this dispensation always at the same time will continue to mean "sinful." Therefore they are able to greet death with joy as the mortification of sin.

Nevertheless they continue to love and to hold dear those attachments as these are sanctified by Christ. And it is in this way that in their dying they are able to hold fast to life with all its connections, because they know that there will be a restoration of all those relationships that are sanctified in Christ. That restoration will take place at the resurrection of this body. Dying and death is the necessary passage to that glory of eternal life. When the catechism states that death *is an entrance into eternal life*, it does not mean that eternal life will begin only with the return of Christ. For we have eternal life already now in the fellowship with God through faith. The full glory of that eternal life however comes first

with the return of Christ, when also all the relationships that are sanctified in Christ will be restored in glory. Only then the last enemy will be completely destroyed.

### ***Having Died With Christ***

The suffering and death of Christ can be considered from various points of view. His suffering was the atonement for our sins, since it was suffered vicariously and as surety. It is this perspective almost exclusively that the catechism considers in this Lord's Day and in the previous one, in which the state of the humiliation of Christ was discussed. The suffering of Christ as seen by faith in this way is most essential first of all. For if the guilt of sin is not atoned, we remain bound under the curse and there can be no talk of any result of His suffering in our life. Therefore in this respect we would not wish any change in the catechism.

However, other considerations are possible and they also are Scriptural. The fact is that Scripture is only able to show us another meaning of Christ's suffering because it has related His atonement for our sins so centrally. If one were to put aside this central meaning, all other considerations would lose their purpose and would not bear the mark of truth.

In question 43 the catechism asks about an additional meaning of Christ's suffering: *What further benefit do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?* Next to the perspective the catechism gives in the answer to this question, there are still others that could be posited, such as the following ones. In His suffering Christ descended to the depth of death where we were in order that He would there take our hand. In suffering death to the full extent Christ has impoverished even exhausted it. In His temptation on the cross Christ conquered the devil. In His suffering and dying Christ was in many ways an example for us. We find something of these points of view in different places in the catechism, but in question 43 however we find the thought that we die with Christ.

With respect to dying with Christ, Scripture not only says that we die with Him and must die with Him, but also that we have died with Him. The apostle Paul writes: *Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him* (Rom.6:8). And from this the conclusion is drawn: *In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus* (Rom.6:11). Furthermore, we read: *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* (Col.2:12). Thus that we have died with Christ is a reality already, and it is mentioned also here: *And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him Who died for them and was raised again* (2 Cor.5:15). All those who belong to Him are considered by God in Christ as their Head as having died. And therefore we must accept that the relationship between us and sin has been broken when Christ died for sin. As certainly as Christ died to sin, so surely we have with Him as our Head died to sin. In Him we have become estranged from sin.

Through faith we need to make this understanding of Christ's suffering and death our own. And in doing so we must first of all look at Him. For even though sin in that sense had no claim on Him so that His nature would be corrupted by it, yet He was completely in the grip of the guilt of sin. In fact, He was so much connected with that guilt that Scripture says: *God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Cor.5:21). Thus we see Him dying and buried for the guilt of our sin, but He arose from the dead without our guilt. Therefore our sins died with Him and are buried with Him, never to arise again.

If the guilt of our sin is eliminated then with that our sins themselves also pass away. All the power enabling sin to bring us under its lifelong dominion was derived from the guilt that once pressed down upon us. Through the curse that was on us, we could do no other than sin. But when Christ atoned for that guilt of our sin, the dominion of sin is removed. It was in this way that the control was taken away and separation is made between us and sin. Thus sin no longer belongs with us and has become a stranger to us. In the Old Testament God in the same vein frequently would speak about idolatry and other sins as not belonging in the midst of His people.

It is only by faith that we come to understand this. What is at issue here is not only a matter of God's reckoning, but also that it is a reality in our own lives. As truly as and to the measure that we through faith are bound to Christ by the Holy Spirit, so surely are we relieved of sin. Our nature as renewed by the Holy Spirit and through faith does not go on sinning. The apostle John writes: *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* (1 John 3:9). And that renewed nature comes to expression in the way we live by faith in Christ through the Holy Spirit. If there is to be a daily life with Christ in dying to sin, we must start by believing that we have died with Him to sin.

Being in Christ and to live with Him is truly only possible through faith. And that faith then needs to see in Him that He has died to sin. For only such a faith sets us free from the power of sin and gives us the ability to remove it out of our lives. That is different than merely fighting against sin in order to subdue it. We need to take our position apart from sin, and it must be separated from us; and that can happen only through faith. Related to this of course is the fight against sin, but in the full sense of the word this is a struggle in faith. It is a constant battle to keep sin away from us because we are and remain in Christ.

Only in this way the old man in us is crucified, dead, and buried. We may say that because of the death and burial of Christ we no longer know the old man, and in fact that we no longer need to know him. As far as we are concerned he is cast out and handed over to the curse. The apostle Paul observes: *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do* (Rom.7:15). The deeds of the old man have become estranged from him, so that it is not he who does the evil thing but the sin that lives in him. Such an expression of faith cannot serve to take away the responsibility for sin, but rather has the purpose that the old man in us is crucified. We must not want to know the old man any longer, but we must turn away from him since we remain in Christ.

The result of that will be that the evil cravings of the flesh no longer rule over us. And it is almost superfluous to mention, that among the evil desires of the flesh the physical passions and lusts are not meant in the first place. For with the word “flesh” something other than our body is meant, namely our corrupted nature, the old man. The lusts of the flesh are in the first place unbelief and pride. From this the entire corruption of our nature was derived and by it still controls that nature. In faith and in fellowship with God through love, the victory over all improper inclinations is given to us in principle. By faith and through that fellowship with God we must increasingly be restored as an integral unity, and all other cravings must submit themselves to the yearning for fellowship with God through faith and in love.

Then there will not just be the negative trend of avoiding sin – for matters can never be stated so completely negatively – but there will also be the dedication of oneself as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. The new man, that is life in Christ, knows nothing other than the sacrifice of love to the Lord. In that love the new man discovers his true nature and he devotes himself to it. And that consecration constitutes the victory over sin.

### ***Forsaken by God***

Concerning the understanding of the catechism about Christ descending into hell, one can only doubt whether that idea agreed with the way the ancient Christian church conceived of it. But the catechism in following Calvin was preserved from any unscriptural views, and we consider the content of this answer as completely Scriptural. We should certainly be thankful that this particular rendition received a place here, for in it the catechism in any case confesses the most difficult and decisive suffering of Christ. During His suffering in being forsaken by God in those three hours of darkness the decision was made. And already immediately afterward Jesus could say: *"It is finished."* (John 19:30). He said this even though the suffering in giving Himself up to death and to burial needed yet to follow.

During His life on earth, even though He bore the wrath of God during that time, Christ was still able to see light and the Father's fellowship was not entirely withdrawn from Him, for He could yet enjoy communion with the Father and from that perspective could consider all He received. And in this there was something untimely and premature: for what He received beforehand was the fruit of what He would earn in that final deepest forsakenness. That He could hold sway over the forces of nature, that He could heal the sick, that He in blessing could lay on hands, that He could forgive sins – it was all the result of an entitlement that He still must earn for Himself. The curse over His life due to our sin from the beginning was mingled with the blessing that He would earn. First in Gethsemane, and especially during His suffering on the cross He was completely forsaken by God, and He found Himself also in the spiritual sense in a darkness in which He could not see a hand before His eyes. It was then that the light of the last ray of hope was extinguished for Him.

Christ arrived at that total darkness by means of a number of experiences. His being led out of Jerusalem, His bearing of the cross, His excruciating physical suffering, and especially His thirst – all of that worked together to lead Him to being totally forsaken by God. Nevertheless, all of that could only work together because He saw in it the hand of God that was turned against Him. In that special suffering God's hand is particularly noticeable: God has left Him, He has completely turned away from Him, even wholly turned against Him in every respect. Also in this suffering we must confess that Christ willingly surrendered Himself out of love for God and for His own.

It is almost impossible for us to understand what Christ suffered in those hours. Moreover the darkness came as a curtain that was drawn so that no one could observe Him. And if He Himself had not spoken of that agony in His lamentation of being forsaken by God, we would only have been able to guess about that suffering. That darkness had yet another meaning as well, for it is also makes us acquainted with Christ having been forsaken. When our Head is forsaken by God, it is necessary that darkness covers the earth.

We will however never fully understand what Christ endured in His suffering at that time. God completely turned against Him. The guilt of our sins burned like a fire in His soul, and there was nothing in Him that did not suffer because of that guilt. It was then that He fully experienced what it meant that He was made sin for our sake. Truly, He suffered the agony of hell. Added to this was yet that the temptation of hell assaulted Him. Precisely because He had yielded Himself voluntarily to that suffering, the temptation came to withdraw Himself from it all. And it came in the form of the voices of the leaders of the people who mocked Him, taunting Him with that hellish temptation.

He also saw no solution then as He wrestled with the question of that suffering. The problem of the *Why* ate away at Him as we can hear in His grievance: *Why have You forsaken Me?* (Mark 15:34). One could think that the answer to that question was self-evident; after all, He bore the guilt of His people. Yet that did not take away the abnormality of this suffering. For His food had been to do the will of His Father Who is in heaven. To this implicitly was connected, in keeping with the promise of the covenant, the fellowship and communion with God. Nevertheless He was forsaken by God. And that went against all self-evident expectations, so that His soul had to pursue the question of *Why*. For at this time it seemed to Him that in keeping with all His inner awareness there was no end and no escape. God had forsaken Him, and that meant eternal extinction. It was thus that He came to the awareness of eternal death.

Especially as we look at that abnormal, that going against everything of this suffering, it becomes clear to us that He was assigned to this by the Father because He had been designated as our Head. In addition, the voluntary nature of this suffering thus becomes plain to us. He took this upon Himself in order that in Him God would be able to reconcile the world to Himself. We read: *For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross* (Col.1:19,20). For this purpose Christ had to cover the guilt incurred by Adam and by us in him. Adam had to choose for that favor at a time in his life when he was the recipient of it. However, he rejected it. And now Christ had to choose for God's favor even as that favor completely left Him. With that He undid Adam's misdeed and covered his guilt. Through His obedience, as He was forsaken, there was restoration and return to God. That Christ continued to choose for God's favor is clear in the words with which He addressed God with His lamentation, namely: *My God, My God* (Mark 15:34).

With that suffering and that obedience He conquered eternal death. There was justice in that death, namely to keep us separated from God eternally, and through that justice death also possessed the power to drive us ever more to sin. And abandoned by God we are not able to do anything except to sin: to depart from God and rebel against Him. Now Christ was forsaken by God and yet did not sin but continued to long for God. That meant the victory over the power of death and also the abolition of the just claim of death.

Through that He has abolished our forsakenness, and *has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell*. That focuses not only on the fact that we through faith in Him will not be surrendered to the eternal darkness, but also on the reality that we during this life may come to know God's fellowship. We can enjoy this fellowship and also live and work in that communion. There may be times when we wonder whether we share in the result of Christ's suffering. It is then that we must not look at the evidence of that fellowship in our life, but we need to fix our eyes on the suffering of Christ. We need to see then the suffering of Him Who was appointed as Head of the world; and from this we will come to understand our calling and receive the confidence to believe in Christ as the atonement also for our sins.

Through this faith we will always be able to live even when we cannot see much of the evidence of God's fellowship. It is possible, even though the grace of God is for ever, that we experience a certain forsaking. This sense of being forsaken can come upon us when God's hand seems to be against us in some circumstances of life, or it can come when God withholds from us inner peace and consolation. It is in this way that the catechism mentions our *greatest sorrows and temptations*, and it would be wrong to ascribe the absence of God's fellowship always to particular sins. Thus Job did not just mourn the loss of all his possessions, but he raised the question of Who God was to him in all of those disasters. He said to his wife: *You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?* (Job 2:10). Evidently God was against him, and yet there were no special sins in his life.

It may please God at a particular time in our life to place our sins in the light of His countenance, and to visit us with the fact that we are still flesh, without that action of God having its reason in any special sins of ours. God can also take away from us the sense of His peace and comfort without a special reason. And it would also be incorrect always to ascribe that to unbelief. We may have faith in Christ as the atonement of our sins, and yet at times fail to experience God's communion. Frequently we are unable to trace what its cause is, yet we do not have to go out from the idea that the explanation can always be found in special sins.

Because God withdraws from us for a reason or with a purpose known only to Himself, He may be giving room for Satan's temptations and enticements. What is always necessary then however is that our faith in Jesus Christ as the atonement for our sins remains strong. Faith is not based on experience, but rather experience must be the result of faith. And even if experience is lacking entirely, still faith can remain resolute and unshaken. Is it not true that all believers have this happen to them that at certain times when all the reinforcements of faith break down, so that all that is left is the Word of God – so that in this way our faith should be tested and purified? That of course does mean a temptation, and these temptations can be extremely serious; however God may ask of us that we venture forth with only His Word.

We would never survive in that testing if the power of Christ would not be glorified in us. In the agony of that darkness Christ had nothing other than faith in the Word of God, and in keeping the faith He became the Author and Perfecter of it. Thus we read: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God* (Hebr.12:2). As long as we are in this body something of the ordeal of Christ invariably is repeated in our lives, and it also helps us to understand Him in His temptation and moreover through this it becomes plain to us what He has attained for us. Nevertheless we long for the fellowship and communion of God as proof of His favor. We do have to live by believing in His grace, even when the experience of His fellowship is lacking. Nevertheless we may expect and look forward to the privilege of His favor in His fellowship again and again. And in due time the glory of that communion will be bestowed on us fully and become manifest to us in all things.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 17****45. How does Christ's resurrection benefit us?**

*First, by His resurrection He has overcome death, so that He could make us share in the righteousness which He had obtained for us by His death. Second, by His power we too are raised up to a new life. Third, Christ's resurrection is to us a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection.*

***Christ and We After His Resurrection***

By means of His resurrection Christ *has overcome death*. Of that fact and its consequences we have a great deal to confess. However, it is necessary that we first of all focus on Christ Himself and consider the significance of the resurrection for His life.

Before His resurrection Christ was fully in the power of death for our sake. The curse rested on Him and for our sake He was the Rejected One, and thus eternal death had power over Him. Moreover, fellowship with God was disrupted for Him when He was forsaken by God, and thus He experienced eternal death. In His dying He experienced the "natural" physical death. And thus death with all its aspects and in its full dimension ruled over Him. Behind all of that was sin, which He had taken upon Himself. Scripture notes: *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law* (1 Cor.15:56). Thus sin worked in that death which had power over Him, for in that rule of death all the power of sin exerted itself. The just claim of death had been completely satisfied, and the guilt was atoned for through that suffering.

The first thing therefore that we need to keep in mind in Christ's resurrection is that the sin that pressed down on Him is now gone. The guilt of sin is abolished. Thus with the resurrection He entered the state of being righteous before God. We can hardly imagine what it must have been like for Christ when at His resurrection He could rejoice in the sense of God's favor. That favor met Him immediately in the fact that the Father raised Him from the dead and with it gave the assurance that the guilt that was upon Him was atoned for and abolished. Thus He arose to the glow of that favor. He accepted what God gave Him and considered it as His reward.

With the guilt of sin removed, the power of death is also taken away from Him. He is set free from the curse and rejoices in the fellowship with God that can never be disturbed by anything; and thus also His life in the body is no longer threatened by death. Even as the glorification proceeds in Him, He does not return to the situation as Adam knew it once with all its provisional features and with the possibility of its loss. He now possesses eternal communion and fellowship with God. Connected with this was the fact that His life in the body was no longer bound by the laws of this present time. His exaltation was shared also with respect to His body.

Among other things, that glorification may be seen in the fact that He appears suddenly to His disciples, and then vanishes again from their sight. And although this exaltation is only perfected and completed with His ascension, it does not take away that already at His resurrection we may speak of a glorification. If we do not keep this in mind we will face incongruities and absurdities. Then we may wish to ask: Where was Christ during the forty days when He was still on earth? Where did He lodge at night? Who looked after Him? How long did it take during His ascension to reach heaven? Did the laws with respect to speed as they function in the universe apply to Him? All these questions are based on the improper supposition that Christ after His resurrection was still subject to the laws of this time. And although He remained on earth yet for forty days, He was already involved with a different system of law and order than the one that applies to this earth. Therefore these questions that are based on a mistaken assumption cannot be answered.

In particular Christ was raised above and beyond guilt and death. For with respect to guilt and death He is now on the other side of where He was before. And yet after His resurrection He maintains the relationship with His disciples, and in fact He renews and strengthens it. For this He used the forty days while He was still on earth. Especially His appearance at the Sea of Tiberias tells us much about this. He involves Himself in their fishing enterprise and provides an abundant catch; He eats with them and has fellowship with them during the meal; He evokes Simon's love and with it also that of the other disciples. It might have been possible that they had formed the idea that by His ascension He was far removed from them and remote, and that they therefore could no longer give Him the love of their hearts as before. Thus by stimulating Simon's love, He again draws all of them close to Him. Moreover, He also speaks prophetically about the lives of Peter and John. In all of this Christ once more imparted His fellowship to them.

These events also shed light on His relationship with us. In those forty days Christ wanted to demonstrate how He relates to all of His own, and how that relationship will remain even after His ascension. He explicitly states this in the promise: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age* (Matt.28:20). Thus those forty days did not merely serve to certify and verify His resurrection to the disciples, but also to demonstrate His remaining and permanent fellowship with His own. Therefore Scripture speaks not only of an appearance of Christ, but also of a revealing Himself to them. Especially in the meeting with His disciples at the Sea of Tiberias we repeatedly read of Christ revealing or showing Himself, as John writes: *After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself* (John 21:1 NKJ). He showed Himself to them in the way that He would always be and remain for them.

Now we face the question of how He, Who was on the other side of, or beyond guilt and death, can have fellowship with us who still are in this world and in this body. First of all we need to establish the fact that this fellowship existed then and still does. And certainly the resurrection stories prove this conclusively. After that we need to see the consequences whereto we are being directed by the revelation of that fellowship. If that fellowship is real, guilt and death can no longer stand between Him and us, and we must come to the conclusion that we are with Him on the other side of guilt and death, and that we also through faith in Him have left the guilt and death behind us. However difficult it often is for us to believe this, another conclusion is not possible. The apostle Paul asserts: *Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him* (Rom.6:8). By faith in Christ we have risen with Him to a new fellowship with God, for *whoever believes in the Son has eternal life* (John 3:36).

To accept this is inseparably linked with believing in the resurrection of Christ. The one cannot be separated from the other. Thus when we do not have that eternal fellowship with God, proof is thereby provided that we do not believe in the resurrection of Christ. That does not yet mean that one is not a believer in the sense of belonging to Christ, but what is missing in us at that moment is the act of faith through which the resurrection is a reality for us. When we perceive that, we are no longer surprised by the unbelief of the disciples. For that Christ had truly risen from the dead had to mean for them also that the power of guilt and death had been broken, and that they as it were lived in a different world. And for this they were not immediately prepared – neither the other disciples nor Thomas. We read: *When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen Him, they did not believe it* (Mark 16:11). And often we too are not ready for this yet, and thus our unbelief is somewhat similar to that of the disciples.

It is now clear that the resurrection of Christ will not and cannot be accepted with a so-called historical faith. It is possible for a person through the suggestions of others and because of his surroundings, to think that he believes in the resurrection of Christ. However, if the result of that is not the resurrection of one's own life, then one does not truly grasp the reality of Christ's resurrection. When we are serious, there are only two possibilities: either we reject the resurrection of Christ and consider it an impossibility and an incongruity, judging it as absurd as it was for Thomas at one point in time, or by faith we enter into a totally new world and we see life in a completely different light. Invariably when we believe in the resurrection of Christ, we see the power of sin broken and we know the joy of true life.

The question could be asked what we should understand by saying that we are placed beyond or on the other side of guilt and death. It is certainly possible to understand that through the resurrection of Christ and by faith in Him the guilt is taken away, even though we do have difficulty by faith to live in that freedom. However, in what way should we see this having death behind us? When we consider eternal death, we may understand by faith that along with the guilt, the curse is also taken away from us, although by faith we wrestle to hold on to this comfort. We continually need to express the

**nevertheless** of faith over against the accusation of our conscience. In addition, by faith we need to know and experience the fellowship and communion with God, and thus also the victory over spiritual death.

However, this fellowship is frequently disturbed by unbelief or other sins so that we also in this respect experience all too often the power of death. And with respect to the so-called temporal death, we need courage to proclaim that this also has been overcome. We not only face the undeniable presence of temporal death, but how can we maintain that our life is not lost but that on the contrary one day it will be restored at the resurrection of the dead? Already when we look at our own life we have to struggle to be able to live in the confidence that death has been overcome.

That struggle becomes more difficult when we see the power of death in the world. When we confess that Christ *has overcome death*, it also means that He has overcome death for the world and for mankind. John the Baptist pointed to that when he said: *Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* (John 1:29). Moreover, as John also writes: *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world* (1 John 2:2). Thus the world and mankind are saved by Him. However, in our times what is the reality of that? It appears that the world continues to be burdened by guilt and through this is forced to continue to sin. Because the guilt is not removed, the curse drives it constantly further from God and toward sin. Very little can be observed of a fellowship with God, and people are the living dead in keeping with the judgment of Scripture. And Scripture does not judge any differently even about the most sympathetic and the most important of people. How then are we to evaluate the history of the world? Is that entire history not futile and an interconnected chain of vanities? Can it be viewed in any other way than that death and destruction reign unrestrained, and that what is apparently valuable falls prey to the realm of the dead? What is the past other than a grave in which all events are interred?

When we perceive life and the world in this manner, and in this way observe the power of death, we understand the meaning of the Scriptural admonition: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead* (2 Tim.2:8). With all that experience of death it is difficult to keep that resurrection in mind on a daily basis. To do that means that every day we live by faith in the resurrection of Christ and regard all things in the light of that resurrection.

What that means for the personal life of the believers is explained in the rest of this answer. However, we also have to consider the history of the world in that light. Through faith we see not only death reigning here, but we envision in the history of the world the resurrection as well. Of course many people reject the gospel of the resurrection, and it is true that in life many different expressions of an anti-Christian spirit become evident, while sins are multiplied and many lives end in death because of this – and yet the history of the world is not futile. Many are saved to everlasting life; there is evidence of the kingdom of God as many activities of life bear the Christian hallmark. Moreover we know that Christ makes the entire development of world history, even if often this is an increase in sin, subservient to the coming of His glorious kingdom. And thus the apparent meaninglessness does have meaning. Christ is able to reverse the direction of things so that He makes what seems to indicate refuse and debris, usable and suitable for building. Even as a grain of wheat is sown in the earth and dies and then produces a yield, so also a world that was raised to life by Him can pass away, in order to be raised to greater glory.

What is germane here is that what we confess by faith we also must experience, for confessing is experiencing as well. A confession that would not at the same time mean an experience is not a confession. After all, we are only able to confess by faith – by a faith for which things are immediately a reality. If in this life we should only see the breakdown and the disappointments, we are not confessing the resurrection of Christ. Faith sees resurrection everywhere, also there where someone else sees nothing but the power of death. Thus every day again by faith we experience the resurrection of Christ in its consequences and results.

However, that will only be possible when by faith we look at Christ as He arose from the dead. Without looking at Christ, we see in the history of the world and also in our own existence nothing but mortal pursuit. We need first of all to look away from life and from ourselves so that all that we have left is Christ. We must dare to say **no** to everything our natural eyes take in, so that we may *know Christ and the power of His resurrection* (Phil.3:10). And then afterward we go out from Christ to view the world and life, and we discover something other than death and a funeral.

To focus on Christ in His resurrection is not the same as having a theory about His resurrection and its significance for our justification. Following the Scriptures we need to meditate by faith on what Christ's resurrection means for our

justification. Scripture states that *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification* (Rom.4:25). That will also be considered in our next section.

However, we must always begin by looking at Christ Himself, for His benefits cannot be enjoyed apart from Him, but they become ours only by faith in Him and thus through our living fellowship with Him. To believe in Christ and to have fellowship with Him means however to believe in His love through which He gave Himself up to death for us, and through the power of which He arose from the dead. We see Him then also in the Word that became flesh and in Whom God had expressed all His love, and in Whom God has given us His fellowship. Through the power of that love He was able to give Himself up to death for us and also to overcome death. We are able to receive Christ in His resurrection when by faith we see Him in this way. And then He is not any different for us in His suffering than He is in His resurrection, and He is no more difficult for us to approach in His humiliation than He is now in His glorification. Of this He wanted to convince us in the forty days after His resurrection.

How is it possible that so many in the church fail to understand Christ in His glorification? That He suffered for our sins appears to appeal to us right away, but in His exaltation He seems to be further removed from us. And in the measure that this glorification advances He appears to be even more remote and distant from us. Have we then by faith seen Him in the right and proper way in His humiliation? For in His humiliation He also was true God and was actively at work with the fullness of the divine love that was in Him. In His humiliation He is no less God, highly exalted and a great wonder for us, than He now is for us in His exaltation. On the other hand, in His exaltation He is not less our Head and one with us than He is in His humiliation. If we died and were buried with Him, we are also raised with Him and seated with Him at the right hand of God. In all things we will need to confess and by faith hold fast to our unity with Christ.

That means, as we mentioned before, that our life and the history of the world is so to speak resurrection for us. We are able to see then that the fellowship of that love through which He suffered for us and through which He arose for us is given to us in ever increasing measure. In fact, to be filled to overflowing with the fellowship of that love contains the purpose of our life and the sense of world history.

### ***Raised for Our Justification***

Peter writes: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead* (1 Pet.1:3). That we are born again finds its reason in the fact that by the power of His resurrection *we too are raised up to a new life*. That is the subject of our next section, but in this one we focus our attention on the living hope to which we are born again. That living hope is able to exist through what He can do in us now, and through what He is for us now. Thus He is able to *make us share in the righteousness which He had obtained for us by His death* for He Himself is our righteousness.

To *make us share in the righteousness* is the work of the Mediator, Who in the counsel of redemption took upon Himself the task to restore us in fellowship with God. Even as He once as the eternal Word brought about the fellowship between God and man so now as the incarnate Word He restores that fellowship. No one could do that except He Who is God and man. And for this it was necessary that He as man would be delivered from death. For if He did not triumph over sin and death, how could He be and do anything for others? Through His resurrection from the dead He received as Mediator power over this life to save it for God. First of all He as man needed to be restored in communion and fellowship with God and that completely and totally, in order that as this was revealed in His physical resurrection He would be able to give that fellowship to others.

Thus He is the Mediator of the covenant Who establishes and confirms God's covenant for us and in it makes us experience God's covenantal fellowship. Especially in His resurrection we see Him appear as the Mediator of the covenant. What He did before that in gathering His disciples, and long before that in the calling of Israel and in the calling of Adam's race, was anticipatorily reaching forward to the results of His resurrection. Afterward we see Him again assembling His disciples, and we see Him send them out in order that all nations should be made His disciples. The covenant of grace could not be restored to us by anyone except by Him Who is the eternal Word, Who now is the Word made flesh, Who now also in the flesh has overcome death and obtained the fellowship with God. Through His victory the power of His Mediatorship is realized for us.

In that covenant of grace *He could make us share in the righteousness which He had obtained for us by His death*. And to have that righteousness, the right relationship with respect to God, is surely the prerequisite to be able to share in God's fellowship. We need to distinguish properly however what that righteousness is, and how we come to share it. That righteousness is not something, a concept, that exists apart from Christ. Through His labors, through His voluntary dying, through His preservation of love while bearing the curse, Christ has righteousness before God. And because He is our Head and died for us, He is our righteousness before God. To the measure we are in Christ we have righteousness in Him before God. As the incarnate Word He has obtained that righteousness and now He is our righteousness. Therefore Scripture says concerning Him: *This is the name by which He will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness* (Jer.23:6). Thus we do not merely need to receive a certain righteousness, but we must be in Christ, Who is our righteousness before God.

Scripture reveals to us that we were lost in guilt, and need to share in that righteousness. In our own reflections we often tend to follow the thought: that is also unavoidable and necessary! And yet how easily we are then in those thoughts drawn away from Christ and are no longer thinking and speaking about Christ Himself! We tend to consider a system of thought then as the reality of life. And then we no longer know how we must obtain that righteousness, and we also no longer know how we can ever be convinced and assured in the possession of that righteousness. This abstraction of righteousness with respect to Christ has brought a great deal of misery in the church. Over the long run this could produce a fearful paralysis and even apostasy in the generations that follow.

The fact is that we need to focus our attention on Christ, and in the measure that we are in Him we have righteousness. And the question of whether by faith we are in Christ does not need to remain an insoluble problem, for when we fix our eyes directly on Christ, the air is cleared for us. The issue for us in the first place is not righteousness for which we need Christ, but for us it is all about Christ Who is then at the same time our righteousness before God.

As Head of His own Christ is our righteousness. And He is the Head of those who are His in the covenant of grace of which He is also the Mediator Who establishes and confirms it for us. The reality is not as if He as our Mediator would secure for us and share with us the covenant of grace, but that He would not be the Head of His own in that same covenant. For then He would be able to give us many things in that covenant of grace, also Himself as the fullness of God's love, but He would not be able to give Himself to us as our righteousness. The covenant of grace must dominate that relationship of Him as Head and us as His own if in that covenant He is to be our righteousness. If we consider Him as Head in the covenant of grace we are preserved from ever separating the righteousness from our fellowship with Christ in the covenant, and instead faith in Christ as Mediator and Head is at the same time having the righteousness. That He would be Mediator and Head simultaneously can really not be an objection precisely because He gives us not just something, but He gives Himself to us. He establishes the covenant and in it gives Himself to us.

In a two-fold manner Christ makes us *share in the righteousness which He had obtained for us*. In both ways it is evident that He Himself is our righteousness. In the first place He presents Himself as our Head to the Father so that His righteousness would apply to all those who are His own. In His righteousness He is the righteousness of all His own, and the Father regards them all in Him.

We must keep that general factor in mind first, for there is a whole community of people that are justified in Christ, even as on the great Day of Atonement all of Israel was represented. That the people as a whole were justified before God means that He has become God of those people forever, and that His favor for that nation will become fully evident in due time. That does not take away however that God can turn away from those people for a while because of the sins in their midst, and that God also turned away from individual members of that nation. In connection with this, Scripture reveals the special service of Christ in heaven for our reconciliation in order that God in His favor turn to us again. Thus Scripture assures us: *I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have One who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world* (1 John 2:1,2).

That He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins is due in this context to the fact that He continually restores the relationship between God and us because He constantly covers us with His righteousness also with respect to those particular sins. Through that application of His righteousness to our lives, the sins are taken away from us so that they no longer exist.

Through that atoning work of Christ in heaven our sins are abolished, and He is fully our substitute. Thus we must look to Him daily as He is busy in this work.

When we speak of looking to Him we are already pointing to the other way in which Christ makes us share His righteousness. For He also needs to do something **to** us: He creates in us the faith in Him as our righteousness. Either of these actions of Christ do not take place unless both are present. What Christ does before His Father's face is never without the effect of faith in us. And when faith is not present, the specific application of Christ's righteousness to us does not take place either. Christ's atoning work is one whole, and its two aspects cannot be separated from each other. Of course, what Christ does before His Father is always first: He reconciles us before the Father so that we would believe in that atonement.

When we do not separate those two aspects, our responsibility to believe is rather intense. Christ's activity encompasses our deed of faith, and with this our responsibility with respect to it is determined. Nothing in the work of Christ takes place mechanically, while every moment in it is also an appeal to us in our accountability. That the labors of Christ before the Father are first directs our faith always to Him for we must not look at ourselves and our act of faith, but we must see Him in His atoning work so that faith is created in us. The gospel preaches Christ as the foundation of our hope, and not our action. And since it proclaims Christ to us, it does however present our responsibility as entailed in Christ's labors.

Then by faith we look at Christ as our righteousness. When He is our righteousness before God, then by faith we must not just accept something of Him, but we need to have Him if we are to be one with Him as members of the body of which He is the Head. It was in this way that He spoke of it: *I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you* (John 6:53). This being joined to Christ takes place by faith, and in fact not only is faith able to do this but it must do so, for this is the confidence and the demand of faith. By faith we say: I am what Christ is before God. Especially at the Lord's Supper we are strengthened in this fellowship of faith with Christ.

What we focus on here therefore is our act of faith. However, since this act of ours is included in the work of Christ and dependent on His deed before God and produced by His revelation of His atoning work before the Father, this act of faith also belongs to the benefits of Christ's resurrection. And thus it belongs to the benefit we confess in the answer: *so that He could make us share in the righteousness which He had obtained for us by His death*.

We need to point to one more matter in this connection. In our time we no longer live in the original righteousness, for that was lost in the fall; we live in the righteousness obtained for us by Christ – a righteousness that at first seems strange to us. By faith we must accept what is not our own. And therefore faith here always involves a certain victory over oneself, for we of ourselves wish to live for nothing other than what is natural for us. Every time it takes the greatest effort to admit that Christ alone is our righteousness before God. To admit this means a complete sense of emptying oneself and to renounce that on which we would love to rely. No one is able to gain this victory over himself, for we cannot raise ourselves above and beyond ourselves.

Because of this it is entirely clear that our acts of faith have their origin in the work of Christ. Because He reveals Himself as our righteousness before God, and because He produces faith in us in this way, He makes us deny ourselves and all that is ours. And thus we begin to live in the righteousness earned for us, and although at first it was somewhat unfamiliar and strange to us, it does not remain so precisely because Christ Himself is our righteousness and because we by faith become one with Him. Increasingly Christ's righteousness becomes our own because we learn to live our life in Him. That does not mean that everything is actually too easy for us and that it seems as if we live someone else's life. What is true is that because of the wonder of faith we overcome the initial newness of the righteousness of Christ. In fact by faith we as it were may be clothed with Christ, because through that faith we have put on Christ Himself.

With this faith we must constantly counter the voice of our conscience that accuses us of the guilt of our sins. In connection with this struggle we need to recall the word of Scripture: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead* (2 Tim.2:8). And over against this conviction of guilt which imposes itself on us throughout life we have to do battle faithfully with the confession of Christ's resurrection. We look to Him as our righteousness before God, and this enables us to live in the liberty of our justification. With respect to this especially our faith says **no** and overcomes the sense of guilt that burdens us otherwise. We must not conceal from ourselves the reality that this struggle will remain with us to

the end, especially because the genuine awareness of guilt is also a fruit of faith. With our belief in Christ's righteousness we do not face a "natural" consciousness of guilt, for such a natural sense of guilt would not be the real true opposite of an awareness of our righteousness in Christ.

What we face is the perception of guilt produced in us by faith. Calling to mind that Christ is raised from the dead produces in us also a genuine consciousness of guilt. We come to perceive then how much we in our unrighteousness differ from Him in His righteousness. To this degree it is true that our faith enables us to see the contrast between Christ and us. In this way the disciples after the resurrection also felt far removed from Christ. And yet, our faith in Christ as our righteousness before God must now bring us beyond guilt and death, for we must be able to rejoice with Christ in the righteousness that He and we have before God.

It is for this that Christ labored after His resurrection, namely *that He could make us share in the righteousness which He had obtained for us by His death*. That in fact is the meaning of the words of Scripture: *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification* (Rom.4:25), which means for the sake of our justification – so that He would share His righteousness with us. For that purpose He rose from the dead, but He was also raised by God for this. When the Father raised Him from the dead He was called for that in particular and thus this work belongs to His official service. We know that He is faithful in this work, and we must not place a hindrance in the way of His work with our unbelief.

### ***Raised to a New Life by His Power***

What the catechism designates as the second benefit of the resurrection of Christ, namely that *by His power we too are raised up to a new life*, is related to the first one. With that new life we understand the life of fellowship with God that we may enjoy already here. This fellowship and thus that new life is given us through faith, and specifically the faith that Christ is our righteousness before God. It is in this way that the second benefit of the resurrection is connected to the first.

We always need to keep in mind that there is also an immediate and direct action of Christ in our hearts by His Spirit, namely to open it for the Word of the Lord. That direct work is very closely connected to the coming of the Word of the Lord, and in keeping with God's purpose Christ opens the heart many times where the Word comes, opening it then for that Word. In addition, when His Word comes to us Christ also calls upon our responsibility to open our heart. What must be avoided in every instance is the idea that such an incentive to a new life would take place automatically, and that in it we should remain passive. In His Word Christ presents Himself to us as our life, and by faith we must gratefully live in that assurance.

It is then that it becomes evident again that faith does not produce something new, and that it does not establish the relationship of life with Christ, but that we by faith enter into that which Christ has done. Christ is always the first, also in our deeds of faith. And yet His action is always directly related and connected to our deed. For He is our life, and with Him *we are raised up to a new life*. Of that God seeks to assure us in His Word, and this is true for everyone who believes. It is in this way that God's deed and our action as it were are joined together.

The new life therefore is a life of faith. Christ is described in the Lord's Word as our righteousness before God, and that is the first thing we must believe about Him. However, in His righteousness Christ has communion with God, and in it true eternal life. Thus through faith in Christ as our righteousness we may also see Him as our life and we share in His fellowship and communion with God and thus also even in eternal life.

In fact, eternal life is something we possess only by faith in Jesus Christ as our life, but it does mean the reality of fellowship with God and eternal life already in our present time. Scripture states: *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him* (John 3:36) and *I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life* (John 6:47). That eternal life is for us not only a promise in Christ, a promise to be realized only with our death. It is entirely understandable why many are afraid to speak of fellowship with God and of eternal life for us in the present time already.

Moreover, that new life has nothing to do a somewhat improved, refurbished old life. For the new life is a life that is fundamentally new, a life out of a new root; all connections with the old life are broken, and something entirely new has come. We discover however that with respect to ourselves and what we undertook were only attempts at renewal and restoration. With all this there exists deep within us the awareness that all those efforts do not really mean a beginning of new and eternal life. And thus we tend to arrive at the conviction that such a new life for us now is only a promise.

Scripture also speaks of a totally new, a fundamentally new life that we must share, and it does so in speaking about being born again. Everything that flows out of our own birth must be overcome, and the pattern that was followed from our birth must be relinquished and another one must be followed – we must go back behind our beginning. And who is able to do this? Scripture also refers to that total newness when it calls out to us in this way: *Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns!* (Jer.4:3). We must leave the field that we were working on and take up the work on a whole new field. We must not start sowing before the last thorn bush is cleared from the field. All of this tells us that there must be an entirely new beginning and all threads to the old need to be broken off.

Such a new beginning can never originate with us, for when we start something we always take along the old that is in us. At best there will be an alteration of the pattern to some degree, but there will never be the beginning of a new one. We are unable to step outside of ourselves in order to start something so totally new. Such a beginning therefore must always go out from Christ Himself.

It is unbelief when we do not ascribe that power to Christ. We confess here that *by His power we too are raised up to a new life*; and that is through the power that He revealed in His resurrection. That power is the power of His love by which He overcame death. By that power He held fast to God also when death came to Him in all its aspects, and seemed to force Him to let go of God and withdraw into sin. Through that power He rose to a life of eternal fellowship with God.

What is at issue now is the question of whether He produces in us already during this life that same power of His victorious love, or whether He when He entered into the eternal fellowship with God became a stranger, an alien for us. With respect to that question the resurrection accounts provide a conclusive answer. After His resurrection Christ had fellowship with His followers, and that would not have been possible if He did not share with them the same life that He possessed. Thus the power of Christ's renewal already goes out to us during this life. The wholly new is produced in us through Him, whereby the ties to the old are entirely broken, so that we learn to reject what we esteemed in the past, and learn to love what we hated previously.

Once more we need to observe that this power of Christ is not realized in our life automatically, but that He instead from the very beginning appeals to our responsibility. Thus the action of Christ immediately must be answered with the deed of faith from us, even if we maintain that such an act of faith is produced in us by Him. Our spiritual resurrection takes place by faith in Christ's resurrection and in the power of the love that He demonstrated in it. Especially when we see then how He was restored to God's favor and how therefore our guilt is abolished. It is in this way that this second benefit of the resurrection is connected to the first.

We always need to continue to look at the resurrection of Christ and at the power of the love revealed in it. Also in this connection we must think of Scripture's admonition: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead* (2 Tim.2:8). We certainly cannot reason from what we experience and observe. Instead faith is constantly involved in combating in this regard what we observe and experience. We suffer death within us, even as we are busy renewing ourselves, because those efforts afterward so often prove to have come from the flesh, and there was not the pursuit of the new direction and life that was begun in us by Christ, but rather a perpetuation of the old trend. Moreover, we discover so many sins in other believers for which they seem to be blind, while in the church there appears to be at times a slumber from which she does not seem to awaken. And then of course there is a world in which the gospel seems impotent to be able to effect any change. Thus with faith in the power of Christ's resurrection as that force is worked out in this world, we confront experience and observation. And nevertheless we must preserve that faith to the very end.

It is possible that we see life in its relationships also among believers deteriorate more and more; it is also possible that we fear a decline of true life within ourselves; and at other times we believe perhaps that the gospel no longer has any effective power. As soon as we are afraid and no longer have any expectations, faith in the resurrection of Christ is cut off. We need to bear in mind that in winter sometimes the new blossoms of spring are being prepared, for also in winter,

even if it is hidden, life does continue. For even if we just are able to continue believing, what is revealed in that faith is already the power of Christ's resurrection. And in the measure that the contrast between faith and experience increases, the power of the resurrection will be even more evident in faith. One day it will be revealed what a power for renewal is present in that faith.

Even if we are convinced that we are able to pass on very little of that power, and that instead true life remains isolated and hidden, we could be wrong about that as well. It is necessary that a grain of wheat falls into the soil and dies; and the fact is that we have nothing to pass on, for the power to provide illumination for someone else is not with us, and also that thought we must disavow. Yet some day it may become plain that it was exactly in that way that we were richly blessed by God, and how God nevertheless used the brightness and light that He had cultivated and seen in our life in order to enkindle the light in someone else's life.

### ***Christ's Resurrection a Sure Pledge of Our Glorious Resurrection***

As there is a relationship and connection between the first and the second benefits of Christ's resurrection, the same is also the case between the first and the second on the one hand and the third on the other. The third benefit is that *Christ's resurrection is to us a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection.*

What should we understand with *our glorious resurrection*? Certainly it does not suggest merely the restoration of our physical body. Our attention is drawn to the fact that the wording is ***our glorious resurrection***, and not the resurrection "of our body." Without a doubt what is meant is our physical resurrection in the day of Christ's return, for not only our body is raised, but it is we who are raised physically. And thus it is not just the restoration of our body but there is in our physical resurrection a restoration of us as persons. Our life seemed to perish in the realm of the dead and thus pass away without meaning; however it will be restored in the resurrection of the dead.

Thus it appears that what is involved in our resurrection is not just the biological, organic, physical human body. For if we were to view the resurrection of believers only in that way, it would be difficult for its significance to penetrate the consciousness of God's people. It would not even be possible to clarify the meaning through the following explanation: our body belongs to our "personality," and if our body is not restored we would not be completely redeemed. That "other half" of our existence of necessity belongs to it, we might add. All of this does not appeal to the God's people and thus the meaning of our glorious resurrection would be understood incorrectly if explained in this way.

The resurrection of the body means in the first place a judgment, for also the unbelievers will be raised. That means also for them not merely the restoration of the physical, corporeal body. Scripture reveals that *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad* (2 Cor.5:10). The physical resurrection means a revealing of the entire life we have lived here in the body. That will then be a revelation to eternal judgment or a revelation of God's eternal favor. The resurrection of unbelievers will mean a rejection of their entire life that they lived in the body, while the resurrection of believers will be a restoration of their life in this time – a restoration in that sense that it will appear not to have been unproductive.

The apostle Paul defends the resurrection of the dead in the same way in 1 Corinthians 15. For him it is really the question of whether life in this body is futile and useless. He observes: *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men* (1 Cor.15:19). For then it would become evident that our life was only for this time, and had no eternal significance. If indeed we thought to be able to make something of this life, and to be something in it through Christ, and if then actually it would be revealed that it was only fleeting and transient, we would indeed be the most miserable of all people – we would be victims of the greatest misunderstanding possible.

We ask: what purpose would our baptism have then? If the dead are not raised, all who were baptized were baptized for the dead, in order to remain among the dead forever and to be eternally under the judgment of the futility of their lives in the realm of the dead. Yet baptism, the sacrament of regeneration and of resurrection to a new life, is a sign and a seal for us that this life cannot be futile and vain, but that one day it will be restored at the resurrection of the dead. Paul is firmly convinced of this and finds evidence and confirmation of it in the very existence of this present life. If this life exists and has meaning, a restoration must necessarily follow. Thus he writes: *There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body*

(1 Cor.15:44 NKJ), and the intent is to say that if there is a natural body there is also a spiritual body; or, as surely as there is a natural body there is also a spiritual body. Life in the natural body – actually it reads: a psychic body, meaning a body as we have it in this time and as we received it through Adam – necessarily calls for the spiritual body, *i.e.* the body we will receive one day through Christ.

Thus what is at issue with our resurrection is the restoration of our life in the body, and Paul is able to place our resurrection in direct connection with that of Christ. We read: *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him* (1Cor.15:22,23). What then did the resurrection mean to Christ? Surely also for Him it was not merely restoring a material, corporeal body. It meant the acceptance, the victory, the effectiveness, the usefulness of His whole life that He had lived here in the body. It contained the explanation that His life on earth had not been useless but would bear fruit and would be for an eternal blessing. If our glorious resurrection is related to Christ's resurrection and is its benefit, it must have a similar meaning. Also for us that explanation means that our life on earth is not ineffectual or useless. Our life is accepted by God and restored.

Naturally that life will then be sanctified and at the same time also glorified. All what is sinful will be atoned for and removed from that life, and the result of it will be placed in the radiance of Christ's glory. The catechism speaks of our *glorious* resurrection. We know however that there will be varying measures of glory between one person and the other, and that this relates to the life lived in this time in the body. All gifts will then come to full deployment, and all desires that were from God will be fulfilled. Those wishes and desires were sanctified and grew in us in connection with the development of our life on earth. Thus our glorious resurrection will also mean a completion for us, a fulfillment of our life in this time. Through this we know that our life in this body was not in vain. Paul also had not fought with the wild beasts in Ephesus in vain, and thus the conclusion of this life is not: *Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die* (1 Cor.15:32).

If our glorious resurrection truly means a restoration in glory of this present life, then this final benefit of Christ's resurrection is related to the preceding. In the present time by Christ's *power we too are raised up to a new life*, and of that new life we know that one day it will be revealed in its full glory. In its turn the resurrection to a new life was dependent on possessing by faith *the righteousness which He had obtained for us by His death*. It is in this way that these three benefits are internally connected and related. The first one is confirmed by the second, and both again by the third.

Yet our glorious resurrection is also a matter of believing in the resurrection of Christ. We cannot reason in this way: I know that I have been raised to a new spiritual life, and that spiritual life cannot be merely for this time, thus there must be a glorious resurrection. For then we would trust and have confidence in the new life that we think we have discovered within ourselves. And that is impossible, for of that new life in ourselves we see nothing except by faith we look at Christ and see the meaning and the power of His resurrection. Then, when we discover that new life, there is in it a confirmation of our faith; but this confirmation comes only after our faith. And faith always finds its resting place in Christ and in His resurrection.

Even as we now possess the new life and the certainty of it only by faith in Christ, we therefore also have certainty of our glorious resurrection only through faith in Him and His resurrection. He rose from the dead; His life has not been ineffectual, and by faith in Him we may understand that the new life created in us by the power of His resurrection cannot be unproductive. We need to look away from ourselves and always look at Christ. Even if we would not observe the new life in ourselves – what by faith in Christ is not really possible – yet we must still hold onto that the new life does exist, for God cannot have loved us in Christ in vain. And then we must still maintain that for us there is a glorious resurrection since it is impossible that we would not at one time be glorified with our Head.

It is in this way that the catechism speaks about Christ's resurrection as *a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection*. A pledge only has value for our faith. If all faith and confidence in the guarantor was lacking, many warranties and guarantees would lose their value. Moreover there are also pledges and guarantees that the guarantor, even beyond being true to his word, would redeem. Such a pledge surely has the greatest value for our faith. The resurrection of Christ is God's a pledge and guarantee which provides every certainty to faith. He has raised Christ as Head of His people, and because of this we believe that He one day will also raise all members of His people from the dead.

In this connection and context we will continue to focus on Christ's resurrection. Experience least of all convinces us that one day we will rise from the dead; instead through our experiences we are often deeply convinced especially of the transient nature of this life. It is true that time has been created by God, and even without sin we would be able to speak of a past. But because of the coming of sin time has become a maelstrom for us that drags us along so that while living in time we no longer do so in fellowship with the Eternal One, and we no longer control all happenings in time and thus our past seems like a grave to us. It is for this reason that all humans fear the transient nature of all events – a fear that at times almost cuts off our breath. And then all events seem senseless, and appear to reflect the ancient Dutch adage: rise, shine, and decline.

Faith in Christ's resurrection has to set us free from this despair. And also in connection with this we must think of the words of Scripture: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead* (2 Tim.2:8). We have a toilsome battle to fight against the mindset of the transience and futility that afflicts us. That attitude can only be conquered in communion with Christ as the Living One, as the One Who for Himself and for those who are His has abolished death. We need to overcome the fear of being captured by the perishable and the transitory. Since that fear is almost natural for our life in the flesh, release from it constitutes a victory over self that can be achieved only by faith in Christ's resurrection. And such a liberation signifies an initial healing of the flesh.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 18****46. What do you confess when you say, He ascended into heaven?**

*That Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven, and that He is there for our benefit until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.*

**47. Is Christ, then, not with us until the end of the world, as He has promised us?**

*Christ is true man and true God. With respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth, but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us.*

**48. But are the two natures in Christ not separated from each other if His human nature is not present wherever His divinity is?**

*Not at all, for His divinity has no limits and is present everywhere. So it must follow that His divinity is indeed beyond the human nature which He has taken on and nevertheless is within this human nature and remains personally united with it.*

**49. How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?**

*First, He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father. Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself. Third, He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge, by whose power we seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and not the things that are on earth.*

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**Heaven**

With the confession of Christ's ascension we encounter the difficulty that we have almost no idea of what heaven is like. What is heaven, and how must we conceive of life in heaven? What significance has heaven for earth, and what is therefore the blessing of Christ's ascension for life on earth? These are some of the questions that readily come to mind.

Certainly we must not equate heaven with the divine, for heaven is a world that was created by God just as the earth was. And being taken to heaven therefore does not mean a kind of deification. In heaven the created reality is glorious and it is glorified; but even there just as on earth the boundary between God as Creator and what is created remains. In heaven Jesus Christ remains human, and as man he remains a created being. To be sure, He is there in glorious appearance, but His glorification does not mean deification. The apostle John writes: *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is* (1John 3:2). Yet, for believers also this does not mean a deification. Also in the most intimate fellowship with God they will remain dependent on what God is pleased to reveal of Himself and to give them. In heaven we will never surpass nor exceed the creaturely or the dependence and limitation related to this.

We must therefore never consider the difference between heaven and earth as a dissimilarity between the divine and the creaturely. Even in general we must not speak of a contradistinction between the Creator and what He has created. Much

rather there is a predisposition, an orientation of what is created toward its Creator. Of course now we may speak of a contrast between heaven and earth, but it is a contrast between a created world, holy, and not despoiled by sin and a world that has come under the curse of sin. The contrast and disparity thus exists because of factors that came later. In the beginning and in keeping with the nature and intent of heaven and earth that disparity was not present. Instead both of these worlds were in harmony with one another because both were in submission to God and adorned with His favor. To posit an original dualism of heaven and earth militates in our view against Scripture. Both of them were predisposed to each other, needed each other, and supplemented each other. From all of this we need to conclude that earth could not exist without heaven, but also that heaven could not come to its completion and perfection without the earth. Heaven was prepared for the purpose of receiving earth and man.

From this last consideration still another conclusion can be drawn. When mankind fell into sin, God as Sovereign was entirely free to redeem or not to redeem them. Yet He Who also had included the fall in His counsel did not wish that His work should fail. In that counsel He had also chosen for its recovery. Heaven, which was not included in the curse earth received, called for that redemption. If heaven would come to full development according to God's original plan it needed to entail the restoration of the earth. Thus according to Scripture, with the unblemished continuation of heaven there is reason to expect the deliverance of the earth. And with the outworking of the power of sin on earth there is great comfort in that plea from heaven for fellowship with the restored earth.

We are able to follow this trend of thought, that is, when at least we do not accept that the earthly world is "substantially" – that is in its essence – despoiled by sin. Baptists, however, though they are not prepared to accept the idea of an original dualism, a disparity, that would have existed between heaven and earth, do believe that because of the substantial corruption of the world, a contrast or distinction has developed that cannot be overcome or bridged. The only possibility remaining is that God destroy this earth and all that is in it and in its place create a whole new earth which will be in eternal harmony with heaven. According to this theory a believer who is connected to Christ in heaven will also have to live in opposition with this present world. They cannot therefore hope for a blessing on this present life on earth as a result of Christ's ascension either. For them His ascension meant that He permanently left this present life behind Him, and a believer also has the duty to withdraw himself from it as much as possible.

This perspective will once more come up for consideration at the conclusion of our reflection on this Lord's Day. At this point however we refer to the concluding words of 2 Peter 3: 10: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.* For even though destruction comes to the earth, yet there will be continuity with the life that is presently found on it and the life on the new earth in its association with the new heaven. Therefore one must not speak only of a contrast or a distinction between heaven and earth in connection with the atonement of Christ and His ascension. Through the work of Christ the harmony initially has been restored, and thus there is an all-controlling blessing in the ascension of Christ for life presently existing on earth. Through Christ the blessing of heaven encompasses the earth again. And thus we may confess that in the unblemished continuation of heaven lies the basis for our expectation of the preservation of life on earth. Heaven continues to call for the restoration of earth, and through the labors of Jesus Christ that appeal is not in vain but one day will be answered and already now is being responded to in principle.

However, when we reject the idea of an unequivocal contrast between heaven and earth not every wrong perception of heaven has been averted. For heaven is often presented as a place of exclusive rest, and of a self-centered, subjective existence! Or, if one wishes to shun this kind of pure mysticism, one often does not progress beyond thinking of the most intimate communion of the "soul" with Christ as if in the fulfillment of such expectation the intent and function of heaven is exhausted. And what Scripture teaches us about heaven does not seem to be able to eradicate that incorrect perception in which heaven would be a world of stagnation, without history, and without sensation. The fact is that once a person has ventured on this wrong path it is easy to wander further into the pagan idea that would then seem to be self-evident, and to speak of an eternal beholding of God or of eternal ideas.

Yet, this whole concept is far removed from the revelation of Scripture! For Scripture makes us see that there is also history in heaven. From the very beginning heaven was intended to receive man and everything that God had created on earth, in order that earth and all it contained should be glorified in heaven. Moreover, man would have been received in heaven as king of heaven and of earth. In this way then the kingdom of God would come to its fulfillment. Because of sin there indeed came to be a rupture between heaven and earth, but God did not abandon His original intention. By

means of the detour of sin and redemption God does reach His objective. Thus when the Lord Jesus Christ ascends to heaven, and as man mounts heaven's throne it constitutes the beginning of the conclusion of the history of heaven. The ascension of Christ means a climax in the history of heaven. What heaven is still waiting for however is the reception of the earth with all it contains, so that life on earth may be glorified in heaven.

Of that reception the ascension and exaltation of its Head Jesus Christ is the guarantee of which the realization still has to come in due time. The completion of the history of heaven is in the future, and the journey to its achievement is one filled with feverish activity, and all we need to do in order to envision some of this is to read the book of Revelation. It is here that we read of voices and peals of thunder, of the breaking of seals, of the blowing of trumpets, of the pouring out of bowls of wrath, and of the constant bringing of praise and adoration by angels and saints. There is also the half hour of silence when all creatures tensely wait for the coming judgments, and there is the entrance of 144,000 conquerors into heaven, and also the calls for justice by the souls under the altar. All of this has little to do with the view of a sort of mystical dream situation; for what is revealed in Revelation is an emotional unfolding of events. And apparently the situation on earth is constantly dominated by the history of heaven.

We have now envisioned in our minds the history of heaven until the end of the centuries. The sentiments in heaven as these are pictured for us in the book of Revelation are related to the struggle against sin and the realm of the evil one. That contest will be crowned with victory at the end of the ages. Scripture does not give us any reason to view life in heaven after that final phase as a perpetual repose or as mystical. We read: *He Who descended is the very One who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe* (Eph.4:10). We can safely leave the speculative considerations that some attach to the words of verse 9 alone: *He also descended to the lower, earthly regions*. For with *the lower earthly regions* neither hell nor the realm of the dead, nor the womb of Mary is referred to. Rather, the words indicate merely His coming to this earth.

What is of significance, however, is His ascension to the heavenly heights so that He should give gifts to men and that He should fulfill all things. With His ascension Christ has become a rich blessing to His people, and with His glorification in heaven the full measure of that blessing He had earned is granted Him. Therefore as a result of His ascension He is able to live in the hearts of all His own by His Spirit. Heaven has brought Him the possibility for the complete opening up of all that was in Him. The heavenly world is one of perfect fellowship, of being able to give wholly and completely. The limiting factors that are part of our earthly life, and which enable us only to give of ourselves in imperfect measure, are overcome and removed there. In heaven all who were redeemed will possess the full potential of life. Such a complete, unmitigated fellowship of life with a development of everything that God has placed in us is something other and different than constantly turning inwardly or even at best personally being single-mindedly focused on God. In contrast with such personal seclusion and privacy of ours, Scripture reveals that we are then able to give ourselves most fully to others and that in this way the treasure of our life will be fully released.

Some human natures have great difficulty in giving themselves to others, as they are afraid they will not be able to leave themselves unaffected and may be altered somehow. Yet they hope to be able to achieve that by retaining a great measure of privacy, or perhaps personally and inwardly turning to God. Such personalities are often considered to be particularly high-minded and sensitive. Regrettably there is time and again an appalling blindness involved. Remaining so self-centered frequently means the worship of oneself and of one's own life. Moreover, one has then not in the least succeeded in keeping himself unsullied, and such a person really has not been able to protect himself from idolatry, for what he does constitutes an idolatry of the creature. It appears that here Scripture's admonition has had no effect: *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols* (1 John 5:21). Therefore the objective of being and remaining self-contained is contrary to the concept of reality as Scripture reveals this to us. In heaven the blessing and redemption of life is giving of oneself in the broadest sense possible.

With this we are not saying that such redemption is not found in the first place in having turned to God. Scripture says marvelous things about this, such as: *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* (1 Cor.13:12), reflecting the most intimate communion with God. As noted before, we should not consider this as a direct seeing of God – an actual perception of what takes place in Him – for then God would no longer be sovereignly greater than we are and we really would be equal with Him. The rationale for such a conception is that in a certain way we will be deified, and in fact the heavenly world is with this understanding considered as divine. Against this concept we already warned at the beginning of this section. For even in

heaven we will remain dependent on what God is pleased to reveal to us about Himself. We continue to be subject to His sovereign good pleasure, for also the heavenly world and our place in it belong to the created realm.

Nevertheless, it is there that we will find the most profound fellowship with God, a joy of which we now only experience the initial essentials in our hearts. It will be a communion and fellowship with God as Creator. And when we know that communion with God as Creator, it almost automatically entails an association with all that is created and we realize the spirit and intent of all things. It means that if we were to shut ourselves off from all that is created we would then also cut ourselves off from the Creator and thus from God Himself. Fellowship with Him would then be impossible. The joy in heaven consists especially in the expansion of our life in the spirit. The limitation that is a given with the earthly life falls away then. Here we have a limitation in all relationships, but when in keeping with Scripture we envision the future, we think of the vast vistas of heaven that suggest a spiritual promise for us.

With this expansion of our spirit our rule also has been defined. The reign that we will have one day with Christ after all is a spiritual rule. That does not mean a subjection of all things to us for our own sake, but a subjection to us because of God's will. In the fellowship we will have with one another then we will rule over all things in such a way that everything in us will be focused on God. Then the kingdom of heaven will have fully come. The Scriptures designate it as the kingdom of heaven not merely because that kingdom was withdrawn from the earth because of the fall into sin, but also because that kingdom could only first come when man would be raised to heaven, for heaven is the place and the world of power. The apostle Paul writes that *by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him* (Col.1:16), referring also to the power evident in angels. With his elevation into heaven man was given that power and received even a place above the angels. Thus we read that *He became as much superior to the angels as the name He has inherited is superior to theirs, and, to which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet"?* (Hebr.1:4,13).

In being focused on God as he has dominion over all things, since the kingdom of heaven has fully come, man has truly become spiritual. Heaven is the place and the world of the spiritual life. That does not at all mean that in heaven there is no place for the body. In fact, Christ has physically ascended into heaven, while Moses, Enoch, and Elijah are already physically in heaven. Heaven was intended to receive the whole earth. To be spiritual means to be oriented toward God and to be focused on Him, thus having dominion over oneself and over all things. Being spiritual indicates voluntary obedience. For man in paradise there was still a certain limitation to his being spiritual. And in order to withstand the temptation that came to him in the probationary command he still needed to learn obedience. Just imagine if he had prevailed! He would have learned then in conscious obedience to have dominion over himself and over all creatures. This situation would then have prevailed unendingly, and would have meant also his being taken up into heaven. And thus he would have been spiritual forever.

In this situation in which man would have had dominion in God's Name eternally, he would have been the image and likeness of God without the limitation that at first consisted in the possibility of being able to lose it. Man would have possessed the glory of God forever, and such glory would have been reflected in the splendor of mankind. The period of faithfully waiting for what God had promised would then have been transformed into what one could look at. Especially that man forever would reflect the glory of God would have made such beholding possible. And eternally participating in God's reign would have involved a relationship with God that Scripture calls: *we shall see face to face* (1Cor.13:12). Yet also in this man remained dependent on God's sovereign revelation. Thus the eternal dominion of man did not mean his deification by which he would have been able to comprehend God as though he were His equal. Man's creatureliness and thus his total dependence on and submission to God is not rescinded with his being taken up into heaven.

These things about heaven and about mankind's future needed to be said here so that we would not have an improper conception of Christ's being taken up to heaven. Thus what once had been set aside for man's future is now fulfilled first in Christ as man. As the author of Hebrews writes: *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because He suffered death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone* (Hebr.2:9). With this we must not lose sight of the fact that Jesus ascended into heaven as our Head and as the second Adam, and that thus His ascension had far-reaching consequences for His people and for the whole world.

## ***Distance and Fellowship***

It is difficult to comprehend what the ascension must have been like for Christ Himself. And yet, out of love for Him we always want to understand something of it, since our greatest happiness is to share in the joy of our Lord. And on Ascension Day that rejoicing must especially pervade us. Thus Psalm 47 exults primarily in praise to the Lord of the ascension: *God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises* (Ps.47:5,6).

Christ has entered the full glory of heaven, and with that the purpose of His human life was fulfilled. As a human He was also destined to be taken up into heaven, and with this He came to the most intimate relationship with the Father. It is impossible to know what He experienced as a man when He could behold the glory of the Father there. With the rejoicing of the angels He arrived at the purpose of His life, and for Him in particular there was a joy, a bliss that far surpasses all our thoughts.

With this He came thus into His full and complete authority and control. His ascension did not mean that He left the earth abandoned behind Him, but that instead because He as its King was elevated the earth in all its dimensions and phenomena was closer to Him. What Satan had presented to Him with the temptation in the wilderness, He receives now in the way of obedience (cf. Matt.4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13, Mark 1:12,13; comp.Matt.28:18).

It could be observed over against this that as Mediator He had received that authority and power immediately in the beginning with the revelation of grace. There are however two factors that point to a change. In the first place, with His ascension He could also as man share in that power and in its joy. It was the rule of grace about which at that time also as man He could rejoice. For Him as man it must have been a continual treat that He could work out the power and the influence of that grace in human life on earth. In the second place, the administration of the covenant of grace during the first period of history was only a provisional one, and following this was the limitation with Abraham and his descendants. It was only with the ascension and with the outpouring of the Spirit that Christ assumed the lordship of all nations permanently.

In “these last days” He leads the history of the world to its final crisis and to the complete victory of grace. Now there is in history under His leading hand a hastening to the end with its glory. The apostle Peter writes about the speed of world history: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness* (2Pet.3:10-13). And surely Christ must truly rejoice about that speed with which events unfold!

With this ascension of Christ to glory something else is yet involved for Him. For the ascension to heaven also means for Him the ability to give of Himself in the broadest sense: He is able to share Himself with those who are His, and by His Spirit He lives in all of them. In this as well we need to take note of Him especially as man. The catechism notes that *with respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth, but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us*. And in the next answer we read that *His divinity is indeed beyond the human nature which He has taken on*. It is here that the Lutherans object to what is called the “extra-Calvinisticum.” We will need to come back to this later, but for now we note that they object to the fact that His humanity could not be present wherever His divinity is. In their view Christ is able to be present in His humanity wherever He wishes to be. Thus according to Lutheran thinking something of the divine omnipresence is transferred to Christ’s humanity. This idea is properly rejected by the catechism with these words: *with respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth*.

However, when we confess that *with respect to His divinity* He never leaves us, we must not abandon our fellowship and communion with Him as man. Because *His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us*, He shares with us all things that He has earned for us as man. God does impute His righteousness to us; our justification is indeed a juridical deed of God, and a declaration by God as Judge. But from our side we receive this righteousness by faith, and are able therefore to receive our justification by faith. And that faith means especially a participation in what Christ is, for

He as *the Author and Perfecter of our faith* (Hebr.12:2) remained faithful and thus He obtained for us the right to grant this to us.

The new life that is given to us in regeneration is a sharing, a participation in the life of Christ. We receive of His wisdom and insight for *we have the mind of Christ* (1Cor.2:16). His endeavor and desire above all else to glorify the Father becomes also our striving. It is in this way that we can speak of having the spirit of Christ, where “spirit” is not capitalized. On earth we already share in the joy of Christ. Thus in a spiritual sense He is as man always present with us. And even though we confess in a Calvinistic manner that *with respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth*, we must not lose that joy of our confession because of excessive reaction to the Lutheran idea. That Christ as man in a spiritual sense is and remains with us, is possible because He has sent us His Spirit. That Spirit is the Spirit of His Word; the Spirit through Whose power His Word renews us, and by Whose power we can understand that Word so that it then engages our life and leads us. By His Spirit the Word of Christ enters our life, and because it lives in us it makes us free.

It is in this that we see the difference between the present situation and the Old Testament setting. It was then that the law, elaborated in its ceremonial and civil requirements, came to the people of God externally. The church was then yet in its youth and *subject to guardians and trustees* (Gal.4:2). Now however the Word of Christ, and in this way Christ Himself, lives in us by His Spirit. Thus the apostle Paul is able to say: *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom* (2Cor.3:17). That of course does not mean an identification of Christ with the Spirit. But it does mean that Christ by His Spirit lives in us and that He thus sets us free, as Scripture also states in the text we just quoted. This blessing that Christ by His Spirit is able to dwell in all who are His own is a consequence of the ascension. For heaven is the place of the greatest enrichment and development of our lives in the spiritual sense – the place of being truly spiritual.

When we consider Christ’s exaltation we also confess the distance between Him and us. We confess that in a spiritual sense He has come closer to us because He now lives in us with His Spirit. However His glorification also produces a distance since we still live in this body of death, that is, in our humble and lowly flesh. We think of what the catechism states here in contrast with the Lutheran idea not only of a physical distance, because we also discern a distance when we consider His glory. We would not be able to see Christ in His glorious nature now, for as the apostle John writes: *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is* (1John 3:2). It is not only the physical distance that creates in us as it were a homesickness and a desire for His presence, but also His glory. At present the fact is still that living in this body means an absence of the Lord, and that there can only be a dwelling with the Lord when we will have left behind us this humiliation of the body.

There is thus every reason for that homesickness. However we need to keep in mind that with the absence of the Lord we do not need to live a life of separation from Him in the spiritual sense. In that sense nothing separates Him and us except our sin. When we devote ourselves fully to our earthly calling, it does not need to separate us from Him in the spiritual sense. Instead we experience our spiritual fellowship more deeply when in obedience to Him we follow our earthly calling devotedly. After all, Christ loved this life and devoted Himself to it; and if we devote ourselves faithfully to this life we will remain in His love. Thus Christ said: *This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love* (John 15:8,9). Moreover, in our obedient service on this world we come closer to Him, for we are then busy preparing this life for its being taken up into heaven.

We do know that this life must go through a final crisis, a calamity for that purpose, and with all that we do in the Name of Christ we thrust life toward that culmination. With this it is as with a bride who prepares her and her bridegroom’s home for their approaching life together. And when she devotes herself with all her heart to the task, she does not thereby distance herself from her bridegroom, but instead she remains close to him. When we go out from the thought that this life is not in vain and will not be destroyed one day, but rather that it moves toward its glorious future, we do not have any trouble with the alleged contrast between that relationship with Christ and our presence on earth. When we are warned against embracing this life too much, such a warning certainly makes sense. But it must suggest however that we should see our concern for this life as a preparation for dwelling together with the Lord. Thus we read: *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever* (1Thess.4:17).

In this section we still must focus on the words of the catechism, that *with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us*. From these words it is evident that the confession is not thinking of the divine omnipresence in a local or confined sense. It is from Christ's omnipresence that His *majesty, grace, and Spirit* come to us. Through faith we must be fully aware of His divine presence, so that we bow before His majesty, receive His grace, and make room in our hearts for His Spirit. We not only have to deal with the divine omnipresence as such, but especially with what God in His grace seeks to be for us and accomplish in us. For our faith that divine omnipresence has a particular content, namely that of grace and love which at the same time represent for us His glorious majesty and also His fellowship in the Spirit. Thus God's grace in Christ is always so immeasurably lofty and yet at the same time so very nearby.

That we consider His divine grace in this way is not contrary to what we noted a moment ago about the spiritual fellowship we have with Christ as man. Again we come here upon the bi-unity of the divine and the human in Christ. We participate in the faith and the love of Christ as man, as well as in His spirit (not capitalized); but all that is human in Him is rooted in the divine, and a division between these two cannot be tolerated – not even for a moment. Our participating in Christ's spirit as man is so certain and so permanent because He stands behind this with His divine grace and Spirit, and enables us to remain in that fellowship. Thus by His ascension neither the divine nor the human in Christ is obscured for us, but rather both of them have become more apparent to us.

### ***Our Advocate***

In the last answer of this Lord's Day the question is asked: *How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?* What is mentioned first then is that *He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father*. It is in this way that His work between His ascension and His return is described.

One can also speak of a certain tranquility that Christ experienced as He entered heaven. The prophet Isaiah wrote: *After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light of life and be satisfied* (Isa.53:11). This happened through His death and resurrection and ascension into heaven. With respect to His own life therefore He has moved beyond the battle. We find the same thing revealed in Revelation 12: 5. *She gave birth to a Son, a male Child, Who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her Child was snatched up to God and to His throne*. In the ascension there is also an escape for Christ, and we must not lose sight of this, for the same thing is said about the woman, that is of the church: *The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God* (Rev.12:6). Of course the church has the task to wage war on earth; but in many instances and especially toward the end of history she has to withdraw herself from this conflict, and to leave the evil forces alone in order that they may devour one another.

It was in this way that Christ with His ascension left the dragon to himself so that in his fury his capacity should be consumed. It is necessary for us to take note of this in considering the development of world history. How often do we not ask ourselves why Christ does not demonstrate the power of His victory! However, we need to view this life in two ways: on the one hand Christ influences this life with His grace and Spirit so that it bears fruit that remains forever. On the other hand He withdraws from it and leaves it for the destructive forces to bring His judgment ever closer. This is the twofold attitude the church also needs to adopt. And when she has the calling to fight or when she ought to withdraw herself, must be determined in accordance with the circumstances. The church must constantly reevaluate the situation of life.

However, along with the catechism we need to reflect on Christ's activities in heaven and therefore on the battle that He undertakes from there. The book of Revelation in most of its content enables us to view something of that contest. It is there that John saw a *Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders* (Rev.5:6). We also learn that *the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals* (Rev.5:5). The Lam is thus presented to us as the Leader of world history. And the tremendous events that take place then are further revealed in additional visions. Thus what we see is heaven as the place of Christ's astounding activities.

In those activities His intercession and advocacy are of the greatest significance. We read in John: *My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous* (1John 2:1 NKJ). Moreover, this intercession is not only for believers but for the whole world. Thus, *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world* (1John 2:2). With that *atoning sacrifice* we must think therefore not only of what Christ finished on the cross, but especially of His atoning work in heaven: a presenting Himself before the Father's face in order that He would be a propitiation for us and for the whole world.

It is certainly clear that Christ in being Advocate does not suggest a pleading with God if God were not intending to grant us redemption, for salvation has proceeded from God and He has given Christ as Mediator. The Savior said: *The Father Himself loves you because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God* (John 16:27). Christ does present Himself to the Father continually so that for His sake the Father would be gracious to us. It is in this way then that there is a continuing work of atonement in heaven. We are not only reconciled by the sacrifice at Golgotha, but also because Christ comes to God as the All-sufficient, the Righteous One as we read in 1 John 2:1.

We always need to see the Mediator's living love with which He once entered death for us, and now pleads with the Father on our behalf. We cannot say it often enough that we do not believe in a theory of substitution, and that we do not merely believe in a particular fact, but that we believe in a living Mediator Whose love gives His work all its precious merit. And thus we see Him even now active among the seven golden lamp stands as John reports this in Revelation 1: 13-16.

Everything Christ does in heaven centers in and focuses on His intercession. The background of His blessing and struggle is that intercession and advocacy. And this does not only apply to believers but to the whole world. Through His intercession the curse is taken away from the earth and God's blessing rests on it. Thus the entire world history is not futile because of Christ's intercession. That there is meaning in its events and that its purpose is achieved is the result of that intercession. Without this Christ could not carry out His leading of history. Thus we can say that at appropriate times He abandons particular measures on earth, specific powers, and peculiar forces as He ceases His intercession for them. It is then that we are able to see the advance of evil. However, for the world as a whole and for many of its particular occurrences His intercession will always continue. Therefore the struggle will never cease, and we may also know by faith that the development of history as a whole has meaning and purpose.

Through Christ's intercession the curse is taken away from the earth and there can be fellowship with God in its history. That fellowship applies particularly to believers. Even as Sodom and Gomorrah would be spared by God and He would relate to them if there were ten righteous people, thus also there is fellowship between God and the world as long as there still are some elect in it (cf.Gen.18). They and their history form the central factor in the history of the world. The intercession of Christ, through which He effects reconciliation, involves thus in particular those who are the elect.

Through that intercession the curse is taken out of their lives and fellowship with God is restored. That is the primary but also the permanent purpose of that intercession. When fellowship and communion with God has been established, it needs to be maintained constantly through the reconciling work of Christ. That activity thus has two sides: there is a daily possibility of grace with God because Christ presents Himself as atonement for our sins to the Father, and from our side that faith needs to be sustained and maintained so that we are aware of God's grace and live in fellowship with Him. Through His intercession Christ also affects this so that our faith does not fail, for the perseverance in faith is also a gift of our Father Who has been reconciled to us by Christ.

Thus it is that we are dependent on Christ's intercession every single moment; and that the communion between God and us is not permanently disturbed is the fruit of His intercession. There is however again and again a disruption of that fellowship because of our sins; but the fact that time after time our sins are eliminated and communion is restored would certainly be a continuing riddle for us if we did not know about Christ's intercession. The certainty of salvation and of the result of our lives is found in that ongoing labor of Christ.

It is basically self-evident that when His intercession is always related to our sins and is also atoning, it will one day cease. At the end of the world Christ steps back as the Mediator of atonement between God and us. Even now already there is something of an indication of a withdrawal in the position of Christ. We take note of His farewell to the

disciples: *In that day you will no longer ask Me anything. I tell you the truth, My Father will give you whatever you ask in My name* (John 16:23). *In that day you will ask in My name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father Himself loves you because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God* (John 16: 26,27). When Christ said *in that day* we certainly need to think in terms of its complete fulfillment of His revelation concerning the end of the world. The beginning of that other condition was initiated with His resurrection and with Pentecost when we received the fellowship of the Spirit.

Christ's intercession is temporary and takes place only when needed. The apostle John also indicates this when he says: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have One who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One* (1John 2:1). Thus our Advocate only acts when we have sinned. Of course His continual appearance is a reminder, a repetition of the fact that He once placed Himself before the Father in our stead when He for our sake ascended into heaven, or as we read: *we have a great High Priest Who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God* (Hebr.4:14).

From all of this it becomes evident that also with His intercession we especially need to think of Christ as man. Before His incarnation and His glorification before the Father's face, there was a constant anticipation with God of the work that Christ once would perform as Mediator. Now however the Mediator as man is involved in this on a daily basis. He devotes Himself with all the love of His human heart to that labor of daily reconciliation. We read about this here among other places: *For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are -- yet was without sin* (Hebr.4:15). Jesus Christ knows us in the love of His human heart in all our weaknesses, because He was tempted with all our temptations, and thus He is also in His intercession a reconciliation for our sins.

That does not take away that also behind this work that He carries out as man we know Him as God. Also here His human love is rooted in the divine and all of this proceeds from Him as God. We must never lose sight of the bi-unity of the Mediator. From eternity in the counsel of redemption He already offered Himself in His divine love to be our Mediator. Thus this labor of our daily reconciliation, just like all His activities, is a work of the Mediator as God and man.

Once when Christ withdraws as Mediator of atonement and reconciliation between God and us, it does not mean that our eternal fellowship with God would take place without Him as the incarnate Word. Even as at one time without sin that fellowship was granted us in the eternal Word, so also in glory there will be no fellowship with God without the incarnate Word. And how much closer that fellowship seems to have been brought to us now that the eternal Word forever has become the second Adam, our Head, and will live among us eternally in the new Jerusalem!

### ***Our Flesh in Heaven***

Heaven only has become known to us through Christ's ascension. During the Old Testament times there was still very little knowledge of heaven. They hoped for the resurrection of the dead at the end of days, but what significance heaven would have for the glorious renewal of life after that resurrection remained yet out of view. That more has been revealed to us about heaven therefore does not produce a disparity between the Old and the New Testaments. Such a contrast may be imagined by some when they believe that our future is in a heaven in which there is no place for this whole earthly existence, and when they therefore think only of the "souls" going to heaven. That spiritualistic trend exists rather noticeably in the church, with the result that those members cannot appreciate the expectations of the future in the Old Testament. However, when it becomes clear to us that the future will bring the taking up of all of earth life into heaven, we will understand the revelation of the New Testament to be a supplement to that of the Old Testament. It is then also clear to us that the glorification of earth life can only happen when it is joined to that of heaven.

Such insight was made possible for us by Christ's ascension. Thus even if we were to reject the idea that in the beginning there was a difference between heaven and earth, and instead we accept the understanding that from the very beginning those two were made for each other; yet it is evident that life in heaven was one of beholding and seeing, and was thus far above that of the earth where it was a matter of believing. And therefore also the still sinless man could not envision what heaven was like.

Even for us, although we live by faith, life in heaven is far above our horizon of understanding. Yet there is one thing that has brought heaven closer, namely the fact that Jesus is there. Everything we know about His obedience, His victory, and His glorification, has made heaven more familiar to us. What we have said earlier about heaven would have been impossible if in it we had not started with Jesus' glorification. As the author of Hebrews pictures it: *But we see Jesus, Who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because He suffered death* (Hebr.2:9), and through this we now have a certain awareness of and insight into the circumstances in heaven. It also gives us some perception of our future life, since we will be like Him.

In connection with what we noted about the taking up of all earth life into heaven, it is noteworthy what the catechism says here. We confess namely that with Christ's ascension *we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself*. What draws our attention especially is the fact that *our flesh* is mentioned. For with "flesh" Scripture normally understands the human nature, whether in its sinfulness or whether in its weakness. Here, however, now that sinfulness and weakness are no longer factors in heaven the catechism still states that we have our flesh in heaven.

We take note of the fact that with "flesh" we must not exclusively think of the body, since the whole human nature is intended. What is meant therefore is our "flesh" apart from sinfulness or weakness, namely the whole human experience of life in the body. It is about this we need to contemplate when we confess here that *we have our flesh in heaven*. The whole earthly life of Christ as this was evidenced in the activities of His body and in all its possible relationships, was glorified in heaven. And it is this reality which is *a sure pledge* that one day also our earthly life in the body will be glorified in heaven.

Thus a special and peculiar light falls on the words of Christ to His disciples: *In My Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am* (John 14:2,3). That preparation does not reach its objective when believers without a body will be with Jesus, but rather that they restored with their own life's experiences in the body, together with the entire earth will be taken up into heaven. Even as Christ also in the flesh is in heaven, they will be with Him. The church has often interpreted this promise too spiritualistically.

Already with His own entrance into heaven Christ has prepared a place for us there. As our Head He obtained a place in heaven for Himself and with that for us also. Without Him such an acceptance for us in heaven would have been impossible. However, His entry into heaven took place only when He had completed the way of obedience as our Head, and now also at the end of the road of atonement for our sins and of those of our head Adam. Already before the ascension of Christ, Enoch, Moses, and Elijah were physically in heaven. But their presence was only possible because of the future ascension of Christ, for He is the firstborn in terms of being the Head of those who will be taken up to heaven.

Moreover, Christ needs to bring to a close the history of heaven with all its influence on world history if heaven is going to be ready for receiving the lives of all of God's elect in the day of Christ. The book of Revelation enables us to see something of that preparatory activity of heaven. There is longing in heaven for the acceptance of earth, and thus a hurrying toward that end. But first all of the labors must be completed, and all the powers of heaven need to be deployed in the warfare on earth. Only then the moment will have come in which the earth can be glorified in heaven. That glorification will be the crown for the warfare that must first be waged.

In connection with this there is great comfort in the words of Christ: *In my Father's house are many rooms* (John 14:2), We read about the numerous elect who are saved: *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands* (Rev.7:9). It is evident that all kinds of activity takes place there; life with its numerous experiences will be received and be present there. We see nothing of a wan, uniform "soul-life," but all the kinds of variations and shades in race and blood and disposition and life's development on earth will find here their own glorious perfection. The revelation of Scripture is not at all narrow or cramped; in heaven there will be plenty of room for life and for living.

Looking at all of that, Christ can also call heaven His Father's house. Heaven is the home in which the Father receives all His children, and wherein there is place for the life of everyone with his own peculiarities, and in which among the great diversity there will still be seen the most intimate communion, and where precisely in that fellowship the life of every person and of all nations will come to full development.

We confess that *we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself*. At the end therefore the glorious inheritance of our life awaits us in heaven. Furthermore, the question needs to be considered to what measure or degree that end which signifies the purpose, already now influences our lives. Is our life motivated and directed by factors in the here and now, or is something of that objective for which we are destined also present? Do we only consider matters of cause and effect, or does the purpose of life also contribute to our decisions? We cannot really answer the question negatively. Even as Christ leads our life toward its destination by His Spirit, and we cannot doubt this, the goal of life therefore does make its controlling influence felt already now.

We are convinced of this all the more because Scripture says that *God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus* (Eph.2:6). Thus, in Christ our lives are already consecrated and glorified. The power of that sanctification in Christ must already now function in our lives. Thus the future order of glorification with Christ needs to dominate our lives already now. It is therefore that things normally develop differently than we expected. We consider the factors that are obvious and self-evident – but there are also factors that we are not able to calculate. Our life is involved in the glorification of Christ. Time after time we see the turns and twists that defy explanation if we dealt only with the factors here below. However there is also a coming heavenly order that already now determines our lives to a considerable measure.

That our life should be dominated by the coming future order of things goes out from Christ. By His Spirit He leads us in such a way that the envisioned purpose directs us in life. Through Christ there is already now as it were an ascension recognizable in our lives. And we must not merely observe this and take note of it; for by faith also from our side we are to be involved in it. We need to expect the manifestation of the new future order in our lives, and through faith we ought to be reckoning with that. In making difficult decisions and especially those in which our existence, our position, and our livelihood are involved, we often consider only the factors at hand, do not reckon with the consecration of our lives. Of course we should not be reckless in our lives, and we do need to involve the existing factors; and yet we repudiate our faith if we consider those matters exclusively. We might then even reach the stage that we deny Christ. And with that we would chose against our own life, even corrupting and depraving this life of ours.

It is difficult to determine in general what influence we must allocate in our decisions to our faith in the coming order. And the future glory of our lives must never be one consideration among others. Our calling in life is to do the will of God. If consideration of the existing earthly factors should deprive us of the courage to choose to carry out that will in complete obedience, believing in the consecration of our life must then give us that courage. We may properly consider the future reward, for we read about Moses that *he regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward* (Hebr.11:26). However, for us in the final analysis it is not really about the glory of our own life, but about the glorification of Christ in us.

There is a so-called sober and objective calculation of existing elements and ingredients. This reckoning however is not at all dispassionate for it overlooks the most important consideration, and that is not being factual but instead it is like living in a dream. It is faith alone that enables us to be sober and factual, for then we take note of all factors, also of the glory for which we are destined. If we lose sight of this, our life has been deprived of its radiance and sparkle. After all, what constitutes the most intense joy of our life? It surely is that we are destined to a glory that is like that of Jesus Christ!

Believing in that destination will uphold us in life, when otherwise it might with its irresistible force drags us downward. By faith, therefore, we keep our eyes fixed on that destination. Through God's promise we know that this destiny will overcome all opposing forces, for we have Christ's exaltation *as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself*. And that faith does not at all make us passive. Instead, we will submit ourselves in all our decisions to that victory and to that destination. This victory of course comes through God's power, but also through His power as it comes to expression when we by faith surrender to our future.

## ***His Spirit as Counter Pledge***

Concerning the eternal Word that became flesh, John writes: *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him* (John 1: 9,10). Something similar can also be said about the Holy Spirit. For when we confess in this Lord's Day that *He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge* we need to think of His coming into a world that was made by Him, and that still continually is upheld and governed by Him.

The Holy Spirit participated in creating the world. In fact the world was created by the Triune God. As we noted earlier, the development, the gradual display of what was given in principle at creation was in particular the work of the Holy Spirit. We read in Psalm 104:30: *When You send your Spirit, they are created, and You renew the face of the earth.* The new expression of life in the spring of the year is assigned especially to the Holy Spirit. It is in this way that the Spirit is the Leader of history in which the development of the whole of humanity takes place.

In all living creatures on earth we are able to observe a remarkable development from the germinal to the mature. Already with the plant we are able to observe this phenomenon, but in a more profound way with animals and with man. It appears as if already in the seed or germ the purpose of adulthood and maturity is envisioned and its intended objective is clear; in fact all of life's processes seem focused on this. Also with an injury or wound the forces and abilities of such a creature are mobilized in order to heal the damaged part. In all of this is involved such a noteworthy focusing on the objective that one could almost begin to think that there is a conscious awareness of the destiny in every living being. But of course, the fact that such a conscious awareness should exist is an impossibility. Moreover the tendency toward the goal must not be ascribed either to the idea that the perfected form is already present in the seed or germ which would then direct all the latent powers to work together to attain the objective of maturity. Much rather we must think of the Holy Spirit Who has the objective in mind and focuses all powers in this. When we consider this fact, we are impressed with the immense work that the Holy Spirit performs in the maintenance and development of all creation.

Particularly with man all functions from the smallest to the greatest are brought to development by the Holy Spirit. That the Holy Spirit performs all this work in creation is the result of the work of Christ through Whose action the possibility of the preservation and development of the created world is provided. With this we must pay special attention to the restoring work of the Holy Spirit as this takes place in the whole world and especially in the higher functions of man. The Holy Spirit changes the hearts of men and focuses faith again on God and on His Word, and also creates love for God and true love for the neighbor. Especially when we consider that restoring work of the Spirit we see in the background the cross of Christ through Whom this redemption is possible.

Thus the Holy Spirit was the preserving and restoring Spirit already from the beginning of the world. And yet we confess that the Spirit was sent into the world by Christ at Pentecost. We have to think then of the coming of the Holy Spirit for a special activity. The Holy Spirit has yet another objective in mind besides the restoration of all that was created, namely the glorification of this in heaven. We must not only think of one pattern of development which the Holy Spirit constantly pursues, but we should also keep in mind the sudden transition to the glorious renewal that God had decreed.

About the believers that still remain when Jesus Christ returns, we read: *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever* (1Thess.4:15-17). With them that sudden transition is very evident; but God has intended that transformation to greater glory for all of creation. When heaven and earth will be unified it will entail also the glorification of the earth with all that is on it.

In preparation for that glorious renewal the Holy Spirit has been sent to us at Pentecost. We have received the Spirit of holiness. That is why those who lived before Pentecost in the Old Testament times could not imagine anything else than the restoration and perfecting of what had been created on earth. It was in this way that a believing Jew thought about the resurrection of the dead. The glorification in heaven was outside his envisioned perspective. However, with the

ascension of Christ heaven is opened for us and after that He also sent us the Spirit of glory. And now we are able to reflect on the glorious renewal of all the earthly creation in heaven. The Holy Spirit is preparing that glorification, and we may with longing anticipate its happening.

Previously we said that the coming future glory already now influences our life on earth. The pattern of our life is being controlled and directed not only by existing factors but also by its destination. That is why there are such surprises in our lives and events often turn out differently than we expected. What we said before needs to be augmented now. It is not so much the future glory, that is, our destination that controls our life on earth, but the Holy Spirit Who keeps that destination constantly in mind. He leads our lives toward that destination in glory, and therefore we are able to speak of the influence of that glorious future in our present lives. Nothing happens mechanically or automatically, for the outcome does not influence our lives directly, but the Holy Spirit envisions and suggests that objective. And as means He uses His Word for this in which something of that glory is revealed.

In this way we understand more fully what the catechism says here, namely that Christ *sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge, by Whose power we seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and not the things that are on earth.* The glorified, ascended Christ sends us the Spirit of glory from heaven as a counter-pledge through Whom we have received the future glory already in principle. In that Spirit therefore we already in principle share in that glory and this will become clear to us in the direction of our life.

When we read here in the catechism that we by the power of the Spirit must *seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and not the things that are on earth,* the question of what we should understand with this comes to mind. The words come from the apostle Paul's writing: *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things* (Col.3:1,2). Through misunderstanding these words are often quoted in order to assert that we should withdraw from our earthly calling as much as possible so that we are better able to anticipate the life of the future. The earthly calling and to whatever we might become attached in what God gives us here, might thus stand in the way of expecting the future. All too readily the church has accepted the slogan: mortify here (on earth) in order to live there (in heaven)! The same mindset comes to expression in the well-known Dutch song: "Eyes on high, and hearts above, for on earth we find no love" The concept appears to find support in what follows the above quoted Scripture verses: *For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God* (Col.3:3).

When Scripture speaks about the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, we are alerted to the glory of Christ in heaven – the glory we will share in the future. This glory means, as has been explained above, a glory of this our earthly life and not a denial of it, but a transformation in glory. And how can we ever discover the splendor of this life if we withdraw from it as much as possible? For then there is nothing that one day can be glorified.

Thus there is no other way of searching for that glory than that we devote ourselves to our earthly calling, becoming attached to the things of this earth, so that one day we may experience their glorification. Of course we must reject an earthly complacency, for we want to live in the light of Christ's future. Our perspective will therefore not be limited or curtailed to this dispensation, and we will not be satisfied with what this age can offer us, for if we did we would deny the ascension of Christ. Instead, we will through the Spirit anticipate the influence of the future glory in this life.

In addition there is something else yet. The devotion of our life here is a gift from above – a present from heaven. We are not able to bring about the exaltation of this life; it is a gift of God's good pleasure. Therefore we become even more conscious that also the healing and restoration of this life is a gift of grace from God. Specifically we are told that we must *seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.* This directs us to the reign of Christ which is a rule of grace. We seek the things that are above because we submit to that sovereignty of grace, that is, we expect all redemption from the power of His grace, and we want to serve His dominion. Thus we seek the things that are above because through faith in God's sovereign grace in Christ we live for that deliverance, and because we fulfill our earthly calling in obedience to Him.

Thus it becomes clear what we should understand with *the things that are on earth* which we must **not** seek. If we should expect to conclude this earthly life with the present dispensation, and not expect its future glory, considering this as self-sufficient, we would thereby go contrary to the revelation given us in particular through the ascension of Christ. It would

also mean that we would expect our salvation from ourselves and from the powers of this life. In the last part of the chapter that immediately preceded what was referred to above, the apostle Paul warned against asceticism. We read: *Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"* (Col.2:20,21)? Asceticism represents an attempt to save oneself, and is therefore a rejection of Christ's sovereignty of grace from which we must expect all things.

When we are self-satisfied and complacent, and isolate this earthly life from the grace of Christ, it entails either that we seek to save ourselves through our own power, or that we yield ourselves unrestrainedly to the desires of this life. It is for that reason that Paul in the remainder of Colossians 3 warns against all kinds of sins. It is clear therefore what we must understand with the things that are on earth. In one word it means a self-righteous life on earth that reveals itself in efforts to save oneself or perhaps in all kinds of other sins. And thus it is clear what the exhortation means: *For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God* (Col.3:3). You have died to that complacent self-satisfied life, and your expectant hope is only in the grace of God in Jesus Christ, Who especially in His ascension has become revealed to you.

Now we still need to pay some attention to the question of how we should seek and pursue the future glory of our life. That future splendor after all is a gift from above that we are not able to bring about; so what must we seek with respect to that? Scripture does not merely speak of a passive waiting, for it says that *here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come* (Hebr.13:14). Thus we must seek the future glory, since in keeping with His Word we have submitted our lives to Christ's rule of grace. There must be something that is able to be glorified; the sinful things in our life cannot be sanctified, but the things wherein we have served the Lord can. We read in the book of Revelation: *Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them"* (Rev.14:13).

Moreover we will live in the light of the future of Christ, and we will be receptive to that coming glory, because our lives are not limited to nor caught up in the selfish, self-righteous pursuits of this present life, but have been granted broader perspectives. And we will not negate the intense longing created in our hearts for that by the Spirit. Also, we will in faith expect and wait for the direction of the Spirit and with it the influence of the future glory in this life. As the Spirit prepares our lives for that future glory, we will not through unbelief oppose Him in this. And thus in surrender of faith to the Word of God that is the Word of the Spirit, we will strive to seek the new Jerusalem.

## **THE TRUE FAITH**

**S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

### **Lord's Day 19**

#### **50. Why is it added, And sits at the right hand of God?**

*Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His church, through whom the Father governs all things.*

#### **51. How does the glory of Christ, our Head, benefit us?**

*First, by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members. Second, by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.*

#### **52. What comfort is it to you that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead?**

*In all my sorrow and persecution I lift up my head and eagerly await as judge from heaven the very same person who before has submitted Himself to the judgment of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me. He will cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but He will take me and all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory.*

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### **The Millennium**

Already when considering the previous Lord's Day we referred to the ascension as a climax in the history of heaven. That the ascension can be designated in this way is related to the fact that at that time man attained his dominion over heaven and earth. From the beginning heaven was intended to receive man, but then specifically man in his dominion. A throne had been prepared for man in heaven, and the fulfillment of this expectation is seen in Christ being seated at the God's right hand. Humanly speaking, that throne had once been prepared for Adam as head of the human race; but now it was occupied by the second Adam as Head of the redeemed humanity.

This trend of thought is found in Hebrews 2 in which first this quotation from Psalm 8 appears: *What is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; You crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet. In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him* (Hebr. 2:6-8). We read there that God had made man a little lower than the angels, but the author of the letter to the Hebrews indicates that such a situation was temporary, and that man would be raised above the angels. He affirms that with the words *and put everything under his feet*, and then he continues, *God left nothing that is not subject to him*. With this the destination of man is pictured. However, man's situation is still far removed from such realization: *Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him*. Right away something else is placed over against this, namely that the destination of Jesus has already been reached. Thus we read: *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory* (Hebr.2:9).

It is in this way that in Christ's ascension to the throne we see the fulfillment of God's original purpose. Yet, we realize that in Christ being seated at God's right hand also something is evident that exceeds the destiny of man. Christ is not

only man, He is also God; and that He is eternally at God's right hand is related to the fact that He completed His Mediatorial work for the redemption of humanity.

Everywhere in Scripture the exaltation of the Mediator is connected with His obedience in which He humbled Himself to death for our sake. We read: *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Phil.2:8-11). Christ completed His Mediatorial work as man, but He was sustained in this by His divinity. Thus it was the work of the Mediator in His unity as God and man. Therefore with His exaltation we see not only the human splendor but through it radiates His divine glory. This is also evident in His being seated at God's right hand.

This brings us to the twofold power that has been given to Christ. There is a power that also would have been given to Adam; and there is the power that only Christ could obtain because He is Mediator and the Son of God. Already in commenting on Christ's kingship we pointed to that twofold power. In the place of Adam Christ is now the Head of His own and with that also their King. That kingship lasts into eternity and will bring eternal peace and the blessing of God's favor upon all that is created. Thus Christ is now an eternal king of peace. In addition, until the end to the world He temporarily received power over all His enemies in order to control them and to lead them, and one day in the judgment to vanquish them definitively. This provisional authority and power is nevertheless related to His kingdom of peace, for through the implementation of His authority He brings about His eternal kingdom of peace.

England wanted to impose its Anglican peace on the world, Italy the Roman peace, and Germany the Germanic peace. Yet through the dominance of one world power the rights of other nations are always abridged. Christ however, will initiate the Christian peace in the world, for that is the mandate and power He has received from the Father. That authority also exists in the power of the sword and in the righteousness of the judgment. Through the exercise of this power He will usher in His kingdom of peace in which true peace is guaranteed. That peace comes through the victory over sin, death, and the devil.

Christ has earned the right for that victory by His death and resurrection in which He demonstrated Himself to be the true Mediator, that is, God and man. Adam would never have been able to gain this power for himself. And that particular feature of Christ's power is only temporary. Once He will return this power into the Father's hands. And all that is reminiscent of sin will then be taken away. At that time Christ will remain eternally as second Adam the Head of mankind and of the entire world; and as the eternal Word He will continue to be the One through Whom we experience fellowship with God. Then the fact that the eternal Word Himself has become Adam, the second Adam, will not be annulled.

The eternal kingdom of peace of the Lord Jesus Christ however is not only something of the future and yet to come; it reveals itself in this time already. The coming of that eternal kingdom of peace in our dispensation produces the so-called millennium. The understanding of the intent of the entire book of Revelation is related to the interpretation of what is revealed in Revelation 20 about the millennium. In particular at issue is the question of whether the various visions give us a chronological perspective of the unfolding of events and happenings. We note that a chronological perspective cannot be maintained. Repeatedly a vision or a group of visions leads us to the end, to the coming judgment; and then the following vision reaches back and shows us a different pattern of development which also ushers us to the end. The various visions, or in any case the various groupings of visions show us different perspectives of the unfolding of events.

Thus we do not have to take Revelation 20 in a chronological relationship with the preceding chapters, and then to understand that the millennial kingdom of peace follows the fall of Babylon. As a matter of fact, the fall of Babylon does not point to any particular event of world history. Several times a Babylon has fallen, even though we anticipate the Babylon of the end time and its fall. After the vision of the fall of Babylon the vision of the millennium also returns to the past. Such a kingdom of peace does not come sometime in the future, but it has appeared in time and in a certain sense it exists also now. The provision for the commencement of that kingdom was Christ's accession to the throne. He then received power to overcome the world; and He does so through His gospel, but also because He restrains the enemies of that gospel.

God's kingdom is able to gain influence over the world because the gospel is accepted by faith through the work of the Holy Spirit, but also this effect is necessary in order that the spirit of the world and the devil are restrained. About this we read : *And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years* (Rev.20:1,2). Nevertheless, the faith of the church and the courage of the martyrs are means by which an impact is made on the world. The souls of those beheaded for their testimony of Jesus and the Word of God will live and reign with Christ the thousand years. That is their first resurrection. Their faith and their suffering will bear fruit in world history.

Almost automatically we think then of the victory of the gospel in the Roman Empire after the time of persecutions, and also of the victory of the gospel in various Western countries after the persecutions of the Roman Church. Moreover, we could consider the conquest of the gospel in different pagan countries in later times, after also there a period of persecution was experienced. With respect to the realization of the prophecy of the millennium we therefore should not think merely of one particular period in the history of the world, for several times something of that fulfillment may be seen.

Over against this power of Christ and of those who are His there remained however the limited control of the devil. All that is mentioned is that he could no longer deceive the nations. The resistance of an entire nation over against the gospel would be overcome, however that does not exclude the deception of many in that nation. After such a time of relative peace the devil will be set free again. That also has happened repeatedly in the course of history. Thus after the persecutions during the Roman Empire came the persecutions of the time of the Reformation, and yet to come are those of the kingdom of the antichrist. In fact, the history of the world will reach its conclusion with that release of Satan.

However, that does not take away that now the devil is bound sometimes in one continent as the result of mission work, while in another part of the world he is being set free. Therefore we should not look for the fulfillment of the millennium in a particular time period in the history of the world. Now and then, and here and there Christ's kingdom gains the victory. And even in the personal lives of believers there are successive times of a powerful far-reaching impact of Christ's kingship to be followed by the freeing of Satan's power. As long as there remains within us a certain opposition or resistance, there also is the possibility of an effective escalation of that resistance in us. The judgment of the power of the evil in our lives only comes to an end with the complete binding of Satan in the judgment at the end of world history (cf. Rev.20:1-6 and 7-10).

When we expect the millennium only in the future, the sovereignty of Jesus Christ is not something of this present time for us, and we do not see the warfare between His kingdom of peace and the power of the evil one, and then we are not personally involved every day in the tension of that contest. What we read in Revelation 20 happens now, and has significance for our lives. The authority of Jesus Christ and the struggle of that rule is a reality for every day of our lives.

### ***Head of His Church***

We confess that *Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His church, through whom the Father governs all things*. In connection with the last paragraph of the previous section we draw attention to the word *manifest*. It is true that the Headship of Christ can only be proved or manifested by faith. Without faith we are able to observe and experience many remarkable things without recognizing anything of the works of Christ in them. The Headship of Christ can only be discerned by faith. We must not forget that everything that is said in addition about Christ's government over all things is true only when seen by faith.

Nevertheless, something else needs to be noted about this as well. That Headship of Christ does not merely manifest itself **to** our faith, but also principally it does so **by** faith. Christ's Headship is in the first place a reality for us by faith. With this it is expressed that Christ's authority and rule on earth is not only something for the future, but already for this time. For surely faith is a reality and signifies the initial turning around of our entire life. We must not make something abstract of faith, nor make it a secondary, accessory function; for according to the Scriptures faith means the transformation of the highest function in life, the one that controls our entire life. It is in this way that we need to maintain over against those who would see Christ's redeeming rule of grace on earth only as something for the future, that by faith it is already a reality now. The millennial kingdom of peace in some aspects has already come.

As *Head of His church* Christ governs all things now in the Name of the Father. The question at issue is what we must think of when in this confession we say that Christ is the *Head of His church*. Do we then consider Christ as the organic Head or as Head in the sense of King? After Jacob's death, Joseph was the head of his brothers, but in addition he was viceroy of Egypt. There was a certain authority in that headship over his brothers, but it surely was to be distinguished from his royal dignity. Thus also the apposition: *through whom the Father governs all things* does not yet contain the fact that Christ is also King over His church. As organic Head of His church Christ has a certain authority over it; but is it also Scriptural to call Him King of the church?

We must admit that in the New Testament this title for Christ is not used in relationship to His church. Of course we do read that God anointed Christ as King over Zion: *I have installed My King on Zion, My holy hill* (Ps.2:6). One could apply that to the theocracy, and thus to the civil government of Israel, and understand that in the New Testament this had fallen away. However, the theocracy of Israel was a type of God's kingdom as it would be revealed in the New Testament, and in which Christ would be King. In that kingdom Christ is King over all things, and thus also and first of all over His church. His statement: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me* (Matt.28:18) included this royal authority over His church. Moreover, we read: *And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be Head over everything for the church* (Eph.1:22). An analogy or correlation is drawn here between His position with respect to all things and that concerning His church. In the words *given* and *over everything* is expressed that He was installed by God in the office of King. His organic relationship to His church as between Head and body is thereby assumed; and that is why this immediately follows: *which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way* (Eph.1:23).

Moreover, we need to pay attention to the fact that the apostles were called ambassadors of Christ. Thus we read: *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us* (2Cor.5:20). And when they are ambassadors, they are sent by the King. Thus it is certain that it is Scriptural to call Christ the King of His church also in the New Testament. As believers we know of a twofold relationship to Christ: we are organically joined to Him as members of the body to the Head, and also submissive to Him as subjects to the King. The one relationship must not be placed in the foreground at the expense of the other. Sectarianism especially knows how to speak of Christ as Head, but does not see Him as King of His church. Being intimately related to Christ as organic Head must not hinder us however to acknowledge Him as our King. On the other hand, our relationship to Him as subjects of the King must not stand in the way of our intimate fellowship with Him as our Head. It is not necessary either that those two relationships impede each other.

For us it is every time again a reason for amazement in faith that we still may have such a wonderfully close relationship with Him before Whom we bow as King. On the other hand, when we enjoy the most intimate communion with Him, we are compelled by His majesty to bow down before Him. And when we think of Him as He eternally will be among us, we must think of Him in the first place as man, and thus of Him in His organic, natural relationship to us. But not even then must we forget that He is also God and that through that He received a higher position than Adam ever had been able to receive.

It is clear that up until now we spoke about the church as institute. We considered the gathering of the congregation led by office-bearers, as they assembled for hearing the Word of God, for the confession of her faith and for calling on the Name in prayer. The question needs to be considered whether we always think of the instituted church, for does the word "church" always necessarily entail the thought of institute? After all, the church is the organized and well-ordered house of God. Therefore is it really appropriate when we forego that designation of the institutional manifestation of the church, and speak of the people of God as church and use the description "the church as organism?" Of course *church* suggests as the Lord's house the institutional life of God's people, and the word "church" always evokes that thought in us. For that reason it is so difficult to put into practice the distinction between the church as institute and the church as organism; and for many people the necessary clarity to make the distinction is lacking.

The matter could easily become a question of the use of a word. And instead of speaking of the church as organism, one could speak about the people of the Lord, or the body of the Lord. However, what is not right is to lose sight of the fact that the Lord's people do manifest themselves yet differently than as church institute. When we confess here that Christ is the *Head of His church*, we think in the first place of the institutional life of the church. As King He appointed in it the

several offices, and He assigned by means of His apostles the rules for the ministry of those offices. Nevertheless, we must not forget also here, in connection with *His church*, the totality of the life God's people live in the world. For surely, the fact that Christ as *Head of His church* reigns over all things indicates that in fellowship with Him the church is at the center of world history, and even needs to assume a leading role in this. If Christ rules over all things, then we whose Head and King He is must serve Him in every way in that governing.

We would however draw an entirely wrong conclusion if we should seek to bestow the leadership of every area of life on the church institute. The church has her own limited and confined task with the ministry of the Word, the assemblies for the confession of faith, the worship in the Name of the Lord, that is, the exercise of covenant fellowship with the Lord in the proclamation of His Word. Surely if the church should take upon herself the leadership of the all-encompassing life of the world, she would far exceed her calling.

Of course the people of the Lord, apart from their ecclesiastical organization, are called upon to take such a leading position. That immediately follows from the fact that their Head and King rules over all things in the Name of the Father. The people of the Lord recognize Him not only in the church as their Head and King, but everywhere they function in the world and in all of their activities. Christ's Headship and Kingship are not confined to a particular organization, for the Lord's people also form a unity in an unorganized fashion which is related to and follows from the Headship and Kingship of Christ. For this reason God's people in the Name of Christ always ought to attempt to give leadership and direction to the affairs of world life.

In a special sense God's people are a royal people; all nations and all people are of course subject to Christ, but He has chosen these people out of all nations of the world and made them His own, and they have come to know Him as their King. With them it is the same as with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament – allowing for the changed circumstances – of whom God says: *Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Exod.19:5,6). It must not be seen as an exaggeration of their significance when those people might seek to give leadership; instead they as the people of Christ must have that self-confidence.

Of course that self-confidence is present only through faith in Christ and in as far as it looks at Christ and knows itself to be in Him. This self-confidence would certainly be deplorable if such people would praise their own election, and would extol the fact that they were chosen, and not praise the electing God. One cannot deny that shifting from one perception to different wrong view is dangerously easy, and that this has taken place many times. It is then that the whole place of the Lord's people in the world has been tainted with sin. And yet, because of the dangers that threaten, one may not suggest that God's people are better off not to be aware of their special place in the history of the world. Thus, rather than involuntarily and unintentionally impacting world history, they should really be organized outside of the church institute where direction and leadership can be given.

Yet again one must agree that the pronouncement to fight for Christ's kingship in the world can readily deteriorate into a slogan that is misused by sinful people. And yet, the believing awareness of Christ's kingship among the people of the Lord must always raise the sense of calling that in the Name of Christ they must show the way for all of life. Also when they are thrust aside in the world they need to be faithful to that calling; and when they can persevere at such a time, it may be evidence that they truly viewed their calling by faith. For surely faith is not dependent on the circumstances or on success – in fact it manifests itself in its distinctive nature as faith and as holding fast to the things that cannot be seen, when in times of decline it is most active.

The confession of the kingship of Jesus Christ is a matter of faith and is not dependent on the course of world history. And even if nothing is evident on earth of Christ being seated at God's right hand, God's people know for certain that is where He is. Thus when the stones were about to be hurled at him, Stephen saw most clearly that Christ was at God's right hand. We read: *But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"* (Acts 7:55,56). For also in his lifetime he knew this and testified that in Jesus Christ there is redemption for Jews and Gentiles and that Christ is King of the Jews and of the Gentiles.

## ***Power Over all Things***

We confess that Christ *as Head of His church governs all things* in the Name of the Father. With this we are able to distinguish between the twofold power that Christ has received, that is, His eternal rule of peace and His temporal power over everything that is hostile in the world.

All things have been placed under the control of Christ and thus also His people. In Christ the original kingship of Adam and of humans in general over all creatures has been restored. With this the kingdom of God has come, and Christ as man once more has power over all things. And in Christ all believers receive that power and are able to use this again in the Name of the Lord and thus the whole world has been opened for them. Now of course it hardly needs to be mentioned that for them this is only true in part. This power of Christ is not only over the people, the believers, but also over animals, over plants, over all the treasures of the earth, and over the earth itself.

When Scripture pictures the kingdom of peace, it is described as a realm of peace also for the animal world, and one of exceptional fertility of the earth. Because Christ has power over all things He is able to give these for use to His believers. In particular through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the treasure of the earth has been opened for the believers. During the Old Testament times the people of Israel lived in the world separated from the nations, and it was evident in all the prohibitions and all the laws for abstaining, that the world was still under the curse. In the New Testament that curse is taken away in principle, and believers again have power over the riches of the earth. In that use of this world by the believers, something of the kingdom of peace has come.

Christ's activity as the ascended Lord at God's right hand is thus not only found in the spread of His gospel, and not only in the struggle for His Lordship in every area of life, but is seen in the first place in the use of the earth in His Name. When believers come to know in their faith the joy of life, and gratefully enjoy their life, eating and drinking with thanksgiving, something of the millennium, something of the outworking of the eternal kingdom of peace in this time is visible. That is most important and first. And thus Christ says: *However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven* (Luke 10:20). That the names of believers are written in heaven means that they as kings already now with Christ have power over creation.

Nevertheless, Christ still has to wage war for the coming of His kingdom. For this reason He has been given temporal power over the hostile forces, over sin, death, and the devil to curb and to govern them in order to overcome them fully in the final judgment. Something of that power and authority of Christ has also been granted to His believers on earth, and was evident with the disciples when they were able to subdue the spirits, heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons, it was the result of the temporal power of Christ that worked in them as well. This miraculous power has not been extended to the church since, and yet the believers are still called to battle for the coming of the kingdom, and their word and action still have great influence, which must be ascribed to the authority and rule of Christ.

For the preservation and strengthening of that influence of His kingdom on earth, Christ called into being here several organizations, like that of the society and of the state. These organizations of course existed long before the ascension of Christ to God's right hand. However, we need to consider that immediately after the fall into sin much had been granted on earth which was the fruit and result of the then still future appearance of Christ and of His work. Thus also those organizations, including the society and the state, are subject to the exalted Christ, and must also be included in what we confess in this Lord's Day: *Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His church, through whom the Father governs all things*. This confession cannot simply suggest that Christ as King does direct all things without having in it the call to acknowledge Him in every domain as King.

When God appoints Christ as King, how could we ever believe that we have the right not to appear in any realm in His Name? Thus the authorities specifically have the calling to be subject to Jesus Christ and to serve Him in the advancement of His kingdom. That does not entail however that the authorities have the task to proclaim the gospel. But the preservation and advancement of the influence of His kingdom does involve maintaining justice, which is entrusted to the authorities. Moreover, the fact that Christ is the King of all authorities does not mean that those who do not acknowledge Him, would not really be government or that they did not receive their power from Him. Human unbelief

and disobedience do not abolish God's institutions. Therefore we must not draw boundaries when we confess that through Christ *the Father governs all things*.

Christ exercises this authority by His Word. He Himself is the eternal Word of Whom John wrote: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God* (John 1:1). When we go out from this, we do not come in contention with what we have constantly stated, namely, that when we confess Christ as King in the eternal kingdom, we need to think of Him especially as man. Each time we indicated that Christ appeared then as the second Adam in the place of the first Adam. However, Adam would have possessed the authority and power over all things only in fellowship with the eternal Word that was present from the beginning. And through faith and the obedience of faith Adam would have shared in the Word that went out from the eternal Word, and in this way he would have been able to rule over all things.

Now that the eternal Word became flesh and the second Adam, He rules through that same Word that goes out from Him. As man He also shares in that same Word. Therefore He cannot only be eternal King in the millennium, but He is also able to rule over His enemies and at the end to judge them. The apostle Paul says to the Athenians: *For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead* (Acts 17:31). Christ gives His believers already now a participation in that Word that proceeds from Him, and therefore they now too exercise power and influence. Even to unbelieving authorities and judges He gives an involvement in that Word, through which they can govern and judge in His Name, even though they themselves do not acknowledge Him as their King and Lord.

By His Word Christ governs people in such a way that they have to submit to that Word believingly, and that He will judge them when they are disobedient. Over the lower creatures He puts the laws in place by that same Word and regulates their existence by His Word and Spirit in keeping with those laws.

It is in this way that clearer light is shed on the fact that Christ *as Head of His church ... governs all things*. At the center of that rule is the fact that His believers have submitted to Him and in their faithful obedience share in the Word of His government. All lower creatures are then again duly subjected to them, for they have received from Christ the right to rule and to use the world in His Name, while the use of the world by unbelievers is a misuse and robbery. The flow of world history moreover is directed by Christ in such a way that all things must serve the progress of His authority and of those who are His. Believers will have to go on confessing this even when they are forced out of this world's activities.

Moreover, the whole issue of the rule of Christ at God's right hand of is a matter of faith for us. That is related to the fact that He governs by His Word. *Only by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible* (Hebr.11:3). Only faith can understand the Word through which all things came into being, for only faith has relationship with the Word since faith is oriented toward the Word. Only faith can understand the purpose of the creation.

The reality is that only faith knows the Word of God as the Word of His love. In creation God has given Himself and expressed Himself, and only faith is able to understand this. When therefore now the government of the world also takes place by the Word – that is the Word of God's love – also then faith alone will understand that leadership. Now that Word is the Word of the ascended Christ, it does not mean however that it is not the Word of God, for in Him it is the Word of God and man together. It is the Word of God's eternal love as it is taken over by Christ and through Him first is realized and displayed in His suffering and exaltation.

Especially in the history of the world's misery faith alone is able to understand the Word of the ascended Christ. Faith that has met God's love in Christ cannot presume anything else than that the Word of His love must be the purpose of the government of this world. And then there is the wisdom of faith in which it observes not only that love in many gifts, but also expects the outcome of glory in much of what is now darkness. What is important in all of this is that we by faith live close to the ascended and glorified Christ and understand His love, for then we can still see light where someone else detects nothing but darkness.

### ***Heavenly Gifts***

The consideration of Christ's rule, of His leadership in world history, brings us to the question concerning the objective of history. Why does everything happen, and what is the purpose of all this, that to our eyes so often appears meaningless? And from the perspective of the rule of Christ we need to give a proper answer to that question.

The answer that the purpose of history can be found in the perpetual development of the human race is unsatisfactory. In the first place it is questionable whether one can actually discern a constant development. An achievement and advance in the scientific and technical realm does not really indicate a development of man as such. Can it be actually demonstrated that in the course of the centuries man has been enriched? For that question must really mean that his heart was enriched and that greater satisfaction came from moving toward the purpose of his existence. There is every reason to believe that with the enhancement of science and technology, and with the improvement of the quality of life's conveniences, one can still speak of a spiritual impoverishing. There are times when there is ample reason for such a pessimistic point of view.

Moreover in the second place, imagine that one actually could discern an enrichment of spirit. Could the purpose of life then be in this? But the purpose of the existence of the human race cannot be inherent in man himself. After all, then man could be declared self-sufficient. In fact, a person may long for that self-sufficiency but when he takes it for granted it causes his dissatisfaction with life to increase. That lack of satisfaction points to something beyond the existence of man; he cannot find fulfillment in his own life.

Furthermore, the concept in the expression "rise, shine, and decline" cannot satisfy the explanation either that the reason for existence is to be found within the human race in general, or in each person in particular. For if that should be the purpose of existence, life would be meaningless. Every culture would then have its era of commencement and of flourishing, and then its time of demise would follow. The question however continues to beg for an answer of why it flourished at one time. Without an answer to that question such success would need to be considered as meaningless.

This pessimism cannot be overcome with the thesis that every culture or every specific situation of the human race would be the manifestation and demonstration of a spiritual idea. Idealism considers that in such a theory must be found the purpose of events; yet this does not provide satisfaction either. Can man, or can man's heart, live from ideas? That would be possible if man were only a mind, but in fact in the heart of man is located the "control room" of his being, and idealism can only give us stones for bread. Scripture warns: *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life* (Prov.4:23).

It does not help that idealism connects itself to the concept of development. This philosophy would consider however that not in every instance was a particular situation the manifestation of a singular idea, for there would be development in the succession of ideas, and in the history of the world that single all-controlling idea would come to ever richer development. This later idea of idealism was suppressed by the objections that were raised against the concept of development in general. Yet these later objections did not do away with those against idealism as such. The progress of development often cannot be determined and would not be satisfactory all by itself. And moreover we would have to continue to live for an idea that could not bring contentment to our hearts.

For an answer to the question about the meaning and purpose of history, we read the words of the catechism: *by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members*. If we were to summarize the content of those heavenly gifts, we would mention our fellowship with God. Heaven is the place of complete, finished fellowship; and Christ shares something of that fellowship with us here on earth already. The purpose of human existence is in its fellowship with God. And then we have arrived above and beyond that existence itself, and thus beyond the self-sufficiency of man. Moreover, with this answer we also do not have the dissatisfying pursuit of idealism, for in fellowship with God the human heart is truly content.

We can also readily apply the concept of development to this. Thus over the course of history there was a constantly richer outpouring of the heavenly gifts. And with respect to that there is not only a difference between the Old and the New Testament, but also in the New Testament there was already a constantly deeper experiencing of fellowship with God. And there was advancement both in intensity and extent. This becomes clear when we consider the mandate of mankind to subdue this earth. The fulfillment of the cultural mandate also is part of the purpose of history. However, when we view that cultural mandate by itself we will never reach the objective of history. It is the calling of mankind in

its dominion over, and in bringing to light and utilizing all the treasures of the earth, to experience an ever increasing fellowship with God. And in that advancing dominion we will increasingly share in God's rule in Christ, and we shall come to know Him in that sovereignty ever more fully.

For this purpose the development of a culture in a spirit of unbelief will also be employed. Through that denial and rejection of fellowship with God we will come to understand in the antithesis ever more fully what that fellowship contains for us. In that rejection by the majority of humanity there is not only a loss, but also a gain in the opening of the hearts of believers for God's grace in Christ; and believers will increasingly need and search for this grace. The riches of God's revelation in Christ as the Scriptures reveal this becomes increasingly clear to us. The prophecy of Isaiah: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you* (Isa.60:1), will then find its fulfillment. This prophecy has not merely received its fulfillment once at the beginning of the New Testament, but throughout the New Testament it is fulfilled ever more fully, while the complete realization will come with the return of Christ. It is in this then that we need to understand not only the purpose of each human life in particular, but also that of the entire history of the world.

However, we will only be able to understand this sense of history through the supremacy of Christ. We confess in this Lord's Day that Christ *pours out heavenly gifts upon us*. The catechism makes use of a somewhat mechanical idea. Undoubtedly it conveys the multiplicity and riches of those gifts. Nevertheless they are not poured out on us in any mechanical way, for this actually happens through faith. And even though faith itself is also one of those gifts, that faith is produced in us by His Spirit through the proclamation of the demand to believe. Through faith we receive then all those other gifts; as through faith we really have become members of Christ.

Thus in faith there is always first acknowledgement, submission, confidence, and adoration. First of all we must acknowledge Christ in His glorious majesty. These are heavenly gifts that He pours out on us, and heaven is also the place of the complete revelation of the authority of the Word. First we must look away from everything that we see with our eyes and all the concerns arising from them, and without any reservation we must place our full trust in Christ. Only in this way our hearts will be opened to receive the heavenly gifts.

That confidence implies however that those gifts surely will come. And more than we had ever been able to imagine will we then experience being filled with those gifts. Life can now become surprisingly rich through them. If only we focus on those heavenly gifts and also on the impact that we are able to exercise by means of them! Life can be disappointing in many respects, while we are still able to speak of a rich life.

That does not mean that we in doing so merely isolate a few "heavenly" gifts. The heavenly gifts first of all consist of fellowship with God, but then also in everything granted to us in that fellowship. We think of faith, of peace with God, of joy, of the gift of knowledge, of prayer, of the gift of exhortation, leadership, and consolation, of the renewal and sanctification of life, and of so many more. Moreover, in all of the so-called natural life we are also able to experience fellowship with God. Heaven does not have an isolated existence with respect to the earth, but instead is intended for the taking up and glorification of all earthly things. By believing in Christ's authority and rule, something of the heavenly glory begins to be seen in the so-called natural life, and we see some of the heavenly gifts in the natural benefits. All things wait for their glorification in heaven, and already now they take on some of that future beauty.

It is in this way our life on earth becomes a spiritual life in its full dimension. The essence of the spiritual is really to be focused on God. Everything natural submitted in faith to Christ's lordship becomes spiritual. We speak of spiritual movements in the history of mankind and of the spiritual existence of every person. That spiritual however often is not spiritual, because it is not directed toward God. The truly spiritual life is there where people acknowledge Christ's authority, where they pay heed to His Word, that is, to the Word of His love through which He governs all things. And only with that Word does faith have its relationship and thus it is able to understand the meaning of life and the purpose of the history of the world.

With the confession that Christ *by His Holy Spirit pours out heavenly gifts upon us*, we must not forget that the Spirit is the Spirit of the Word. Thus we are able to maintain that this outpouring takes place by way of faith, and every mechanical interpretation can be precluded. The spiritual gifts which we extol are the gifts of faith that are received in the way of a faith that connects itself to the Word. We do not expect any abnormal things then, and our hearts do not go out

to what is sensational; we do not force a renewal but we expect God's gifts in the way of a believing obedience to His Word. Christ will provide for every circumstance in life, and we do not forget that the Father has placed the times and circumstances in His own power. It does not appeal to us to launch a new world.

That does not take away that Christ possesses an abundance of heavenly gifts. Indeed, heaven is the place of complete fullness. Whenever the church cannot cope with a movement of the times, and in spirit cannot rise above it, or whenever we cannot cope with one or the other situation, it does not mean that the gifts of Christ for us are inadequate, but the problem is that we by faith have not been open to receive those gifts. There is often a shortage of gifts among believers, a deficiency in being anointed, or a spiritual inability. However, it always goes back to a lack of expectation by faith.

In every situation the church is able to have the attitude of victor, because Christ will prepare her for that, and in every circumstance the church can have an influence that is irresistible. After all, for what situation would the equipping of the Spirit of Christ ever be inadequate? Whenever the church displays a feeble posture, perhaps years of a lack of exercise of faith lie behind it. The gifts are not given to us in a moment, but we have been prepared for this with years of fellowship with God. In addition, the gifts that were placed in us at birth and are sanctified by regeneration, linger within us when the fellowship of faith with God is missing, because they can only be raised in that fellowship. In a life-long relationship with God through faith we are equipped more and more for our life's task. The working of the Spirit of Christ for the outpouring of His heavenly gifts is an organic one that is related to our entire journey of life with the leading of the Spirit in it, and with our continual exercise of faith.

Through the outpouring of the heavenly gifts the bond between the Head in heaven and the church on earth is strengthened. In that relationship there is a blessing present for the entire world, for the sense and purpose of history lies in the fellowship between God and His people. Thus it is evident even more clearly that the church is at the center of the world, and that the history of the church constitutes the history of the world. This is observed in the fact that the Head of the church rules the world.

### ***Preservation Against the Enemies***

Also in the second answer of this Lord's Day the distinction between the twofold power of Christ becomes evident. When we read that *He by His Holy Spirit pours out His heavenly gifts upon us*, we think of His eternal dominion of peace that has already begun. But when we read that *by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies*, and we think especially of His temporal power that He exercises over His enemies.

In addition we need to consider that the exercise of the twofold power intends the exaltation of Christ's glory. When we read of a pouring out the heavenly gifts on us, and a defending and preserving against all enemies, we would be able to misuse this promise and comfort in an egocentric way. The purpose of the existence of the church does not consist in that existence itself, even as the purpose of life does not consist in life itself. In fact the existence of the church points beyond herself, namely to the glory of God in Christ. Thus we receive the heavenly gifts only when we fix our eyes on Christ and intend His glory. We receive those gifts in order that we should be His and serve Him. Outside of that intent and meaning they cannot be given to us.

Thus we are not defended and preserved against all enemies if we would anxiously be concerned only for the protection of our own lives. That preservation is in the surrender of self in the service of Christ. Then we would not recklessly seek danger but we would also not avoid all danger, and thus we would seek our pathway in the surrender of ourselves in His service. What we have in mind is the glory of Christ, and in keeping with this view we pattern our life accordingly. As a wondrous gift we will then discover that He preserves us in that surrender of self. In fact, that we could give ourselves to Him was already His gift; and in being with Him we are safe.

With this it is clear that being preserved does not consist in remaining invulnerable and immune to all temporal dangers. Persecution and oppression is the lot of believers; they also may have to suffer death for the sake of Christ. What is inviolable is their fellowship with God – the eternal life that they have in that communion.

Therefore we need to observe here that they will be defended and preserved through faith. Moreover, the fulfilling of this promise does not take place mechanically. Christ arouses faith in us through the Word of His promise, and in that faith we hold fast to Him in His omnipotent grace, and thus we are preserved against the attacking power of the enemies. And we should also realize that Christ does not deter all attacks of the enemies, for it may please Him to allow certain attacks at various times in order that we may need Him in the battle, and discover Him even more fully.

Through that faith we learn to recognize the enemies as adversaries, and we learn to discern enemies where we previously saw only friends. Through faith we see Christ in His sovereignty laying claim to all of life; and where a devotion to the service of the glorified Christ is not found, we see opposition and enmity. The glorification of Christ that we see by faith, places an absolute contrast in every experience of life, as He Himself said: *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword* (Matt.10:34).

Part of the preservation of Christ is that we discover enemies whom we had not noticed as such earlier. The two parts of this answer are closely related to each other: because we receive the heavenly gifts, our eyes are opened so that we observe enemies and are armed against them. There is a continuing process of inner, spiritual separation from sin in connection with that ongoing illumination. Thus it is evident that with enemies we do not in the first place think of people. We observe spiritual movements and powers among people, forces and alliances that we consider with respect to Christ and also to us as hostile. And yet at the same time there is still a compassion for the people in us.

Yet this does not mean that we do not also turn ourselves against people. For in the actions of people there are always two sides to consider and distinguish: they themselves are the doers of evil but yet are also moved by it, and thus they are at the same time responsible and guilty, but also are swayed and therefore victims. As far as they perpetrate the evil themselves, in that measure they are enemies. To the measure that they themselves are moved by it, we can still have compassion for them. However, we need to turn especially against the spiritual movements in which we are also involved through our own sins, and in which we are doers and are moved. Thus we must also turn against ourselves; in our sins we also belong to the enemies against which we must be defended and from whom we are to be preserved.

The enemies against whom *He defends and preserves us* are especially sin, the “world”, and the devil. Against these we are preserved in the battle of faith. The more intense that battle becomes, the more receptive and ready we are to receive those heavenly gifts. In this way also there is a certain interrelationship between the first and the second sentences of this answer. We will need the spiritual gifts increasingly, that is, the gifts of submission to the heavenly authority of Christ, and in this submission we will be given everything that we need so that we will not perish in that battle. We do not cherish the confrontation in itself, for it rather burdens us that on earth we constantly are the church militant, and also because of this we long for the return of Christ. And yet there is a certain rejoicing in it as well, for in that warfare we are enriched with spiritual gifts. Moreover the joy of faith can even grow in intensity as the battle increases.

It is clear therefore that we do not engage in that contest merely in a single sphere of life, or that we need to be defended and preserved from the enemy only in a limited area of life. The kingdom of Jesus Christ has within it the compelling force to reveal itself everywhere; and especially in being subservient to that obligation we meet the enemy everywhere. The most ordinary work can be service in His kingdom when we perform it in His Name. We have to struggle in particular to carry out that work not “neutrally,” but in obedience of faith to Him. When we begin to see that, it indicates the manner in which *He defends and preserves us*. This promise is not merely negative, and it does not demand of us a purely passive attitude of life, for the negative that exists in the preservation comes to us in the positive dedication, and thus in the sanctification of our whole life to the Lord. And in that dedication, even if it is given to us as a gift, we have to play an active role. Especially in the battle for the sanctification of life we will constantly need to take hold of the power of Christ by faith.

### ***Development or Apocalypse?***

The expectation of Christ’s return is a significant factor in the life of the church; at least it deserves to be an important factor in it. In the place this expectation occupies in the life of the church much change has taken place over time. There have been times when that expectation has been pushed into the background, but there are also times in which the doctrine of His parousia appears to dominate all else.

In the optimistic eighteenth century there seemed to be no place any more for that anticipation. People were satisfied with life, and they wanted to push aside a future apocalypse with the accompanying judgment as an idle scare tactic. With the start of the nineteenth century, and after the horrors of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic time, all sorts of Adventist and Chiliastic sects and movements appeared. It was the time of a fervent expectation of Christ's return. In the second half of the nineteenth century that expectation was replaced with the evolution dream. They anticipated that we would experience constant development and progress, and with that aspiration the proclamation of the coming apocalypse was not compatible.

The world war at the beginning of the twentieth century and the disappointment of the expectation that people harbored at the end of it once more enhanced the hope for an entirely different future that would come through Christ. Many no longer had any real expectation of this present life and rejected it totally, and for them everything in life was focused on Christ's return. They contended that we need to see things escatologically, that is, from the perspective of the end of all things.

This constant vacillation can teach us much. A great danger is found in the fact that the expectation of the future appears to depend to a large degree on the present circumstances. When circumstances influence our observation, our perspective will be unduly affected by it, so that we will not be able to see clearly what Scripture reveals to us with respect to the future.

According to Scripture we need to distinguish two factors and must take both into account equally. On the one hand Scripture teaches us that with the coming of Christ and with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the principal renewal of heaven and earth has begun. It was then that the new and eternal testament began, and this second covenant provision will not be followed by a third; what we experience now remains for ever.

Yet on the other hand, Scripture teaches us that at the end of the centuries we have to expect a complete transformation. Not only will a glorification come, a being changed of all that exists into a greater glory; but that change will come about through a tremendous calamity when not one stone will be left on the other. The expectation of the disciples who pointed Jesus to the beautiful buildings of the temple, was no different than the anticipation of a development of Israel to higher glory. Jesus rejected that expectation of the Jews totally by prophesying about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. We read: *Do you see all these things He asked?. I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down* (Matt.24: 2). This prophecy also contains the prediction of the destruction of the world. Thus we are warned against expecting a permanent development leading to complete glory. And yet the awareness of the coming apocalypse must not make us fail to appreciate the truth that with the outpouring of the Spirit the principal renewal has already come.

Thus we have to consider the present covenant provision from a twofold perspective: from that of Pentecost, but also from the point of view of the return of Christ. It is that which produces the uniquely tense nature of this time that Scripture designates by speaking about the last days. According to the prophecy of Joel the outpouring of the Spirit is related directly to the destruction of the world, and with outpouring of the Spirit the critical time has been reached. The prophet writes: *And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD* (Joel 2: 28-31). That crisis bears the character of having the decisive event take place in one moment, and yet it lasts many centuries. We live in the turning-point of history on a daily basis.

That we have to reckon with these two factors should not lead us continually to drift from one to the other. That is, we live for a while out of the principal renewal that has already come, but then indulge ourselves in the dream of developing and enhancing what was once given, and then again totally forget the outpouring of the Spirit and expect everything from the coming apocalypse. We will have to consider carefully for ourselves how we come to the decision on how to answer the question that seems to be a dilemma for so many: development or apocalypse? In doing so, at the same time we will have to come to clarity with respect to the relationship between faith and hope. The question is: Does the faith of Christ's church consist totally in the hope of a future blessing, or does she already now have that blessed salvation by faith?

Could the twofold revelation of Scripture, namely, that of Pentecost and the one with respect to the coming of Christ produce an inner contradiction in our spiritual life? This would be the case should we have to choose between faith and hope, if we for the sake of our present certainty of faith needed to renounce our hope. Or conversely, if we would have to renounce all we have in faith and define faith exclusively as hope. However, faith and hope are distinct and each has its own place in our life. Of that relationship between the two we need to observe that hope originates in faith. Thus without faith, that is, without presently possessing salvation by faith, there is no hope. We cannot hope for something that is at this time still totally strange and unknown to us.

We must not forget that Paul's words *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him* (1Cor.2:9) indicate what it is that in principle is already given to us. What we hope for is the completion and elaboration of what we now possess in Christ. The future judgment, as all of God's judgments do, will mean a redemption of the world, its liberation from the power of sin. Thus, among other instances, it was with the flood of Noah's time and with the destruction of Jerusalem. What we possess now in Christ will be preserved in the judgment and led to victory. Scripture instructs: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare* (2Pet.3:10).

On that day, therefore, there will not only be the continuation of our fellowship with God as we now already experience this through faith, but then more gloriously. But the result of that fellowship between God and His people in the entire development and progress of the world will prove not to have been in vain and not annihilated by the judgment, and that such results will be preserved in the judgment. However that same chapter and the same verse also reveals to us the apocalypse. Christ's parousia brings a complete renewal. God says in the book of Revelation: *He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then He said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true"* (Rev.21:5). That making new is a restoration according to the original design and intent, though in a higher order.

Only God knows the original design, the dominant theme of the work of creation, namely the fellowship between Him and those who are His. And God retained that design, also in the history of sin. He has given His fellowship in Christ, He enabled His people to be fruitful in that fellowship, and through that He made the development of the entire world possible. In particular with Pentecost He sought to grant the full intensity of that fellowship and to have this experienced in all of the world's life and cultural activity. The day of Christ brings an end to all of that activity. And yet sin is connected so closely to the nature of this world, that its deliverance cannot come by way of development but must be accomplished by means of the apocalypse. According to Scripture we speak of the completion; but that conclusion does not come without change, but through a complete transformation.

There is in the life of believers, therefore, no inner contradiction evident, but they are hard-pressed from two sides. We long for the increase of what already now we have received in Christ, and we want to hold on to this. Thus when we see the judgments coming we plead for their removal, and yet on the other hand we know that the end must come in the way of judgment, and thus we also long and pray for that judgment. But we do find within us a certain agreement when we are not taken in with our own self but instead focus in all matters on fellowship with God. For then we know that we would not be able to hold on to that fellowship in the unchanged existence of things when His time for judgment would come. Even as Abraham prayed for the preservation of Sodom and Gomorrah, although he knew that the promise to him and his descendants had to be fulfilled by means of the judgment of the Canaanites, in the same way we pray for the taking away of the judgments. However, just like Abraham, when God's time appears to have come to concur with that judgment not because of the judgment but because of the fulfillment of the promise, we pray: *Come, Lord Jesus!* (Rev.22:20).

When we see the return of Christ in this way, then the intense longing for His return does not cause us to withdraw from the life of our time. Instead we will be busy in fellowship with God to labor for the development and improvement of life and the world. In this way we will be able to remain close to Christ and His return. And in this work, especially with a view to the future, we are in a great hurry. For Scripture exhorts: *Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes!* (Luke 12:43 NKJ).

However, in having said this it is not intended to convey that believers do not need to withdraw from various areas of life at the end of time. A time will come in which the influencing of life through various activities in the Name of Christ will become entirely impossible. The book of Revelation does not only tell us something of the millennium, but also about the flight of the woman into the desert: *The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days* (Rev.12:6). At that time the church will no longer have opportunity to take part in cultural activity in the broader sense. Also this vision of Revelation 12 is not just first fulfilled at the end of time, for the church has had to face the necessity to flee many times in history. For example she needed to flee during the persecutions of the Roman Empire; also in the early time of the Reformation she was often no more than a hidden church; and even later she had to appear several times as the church under the cross. However, the final fulfillment of the vision of Revelation 12 should be viewed in the light of Christ's return.

Christ taught His disciples: *So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel-- let the reader understand-- then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath* (Matt.24:15-20). With this He said to the believers among the Jews with respect to the destruction of Jerusalem, that when they saw the abomination of the destruction of the Holy Place they should not take up their sword to defend the national cause, but rather to flee to the mountains.

If this prophecy predicts anything about the end of the world, it tells us is also something about the behavior of the church as the end approaches. We will have to abandon the battle for the preservation of this world with its entire involvement in God's covenant, believing that God will preserve this world in a higher order in the future of Christ. The question is, however, how we should do this and in what measure and to what degree.

There are people who gladly abandon this world without any sorrow, and without experiencing any struggle because of their expectation of Christ. A similar inclination still exists in the church and especially in sectarianism. Over against these there are also people who reluctantly and because it cannot be otherwise, will have to let go of much of this world in the struggle of faith. And then they can never let go of everything; not only do they continue to struggle for the sanctification of their own life, but they will never be able to abandon the church and their family.

In all of this we cannot draw a sharp line of demarcation. The fact is that the sanctification of one person's actions always influences that of another. And yet in that abandoning there is also obedience. But that does not mean that the more we have to abandon the struggle for the sanctification of the world, the more we intensify our expectation of Christ's return. On the contrary, because we have to give up that effort, our expectation of Christ increasingly comes under pressure. We may think that with the worsening of evil on earth the anticipation of that future would be stirred all the more; but the danger emerges however that we long for that future only to escape the misery of this time, and that the love for Christ and for the revelation of His kingdom does not motivate us.

If that love is present we would attempt to retain that coming of His kingdom in this time as long as possible. And then we know that something needs to cross over from this time into that future. For in holding firm the confession of the apocalypse we see His coming as a completion. We can expect Him because we can see Him approaching; and when we are no longer able to see Him in the outworking of His kingdom on earth, His return is being eclipsed for us. Faith in the future of Christ will not become easier in the last days but be more difficult, and it will no longer be obvious or self-evident. Our expectation relates increasingly less to what we observe.

There are two indicators that provide some support for us in our struggle for the expectation of Christ's return. In the first place, we realize that this breaking down of the coming of God's kingdom has been predicted. And secondly, our faith trusting that this persecution is necessary for the coming of God's kingdom is able to conclude from such deterioration that the kingdom is actually coming. For faith also believes in the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the "world;" and when the times give rise to the final crisis, faith is able to see the hand of Christ in the fire that is cast on the earth. Thus the coming persecution can contribute to the expectation of Christ's return, and in this we need to go out from what the kingdom of Christ needs to mean in this time.

## ***The Coming Judgment***

In what we wrote above we repeatedly spoke of development, and accepted the idea of an advance in the outworking of the kingdom of God on earth. With His blessing in the kingdom of God the historical development of culture was made possible. In this we must not overlook that such development also makes the broadening and increasing presence of sin possible. The development of the world, the realization of all its treasures, the coming to know the deepest mysteries of mankind – all of that is possible only by the grace of Christ. Yet at the same time it provides fuel for sin and the destructive powers. Thus it is that two forces develop in the world, and there is a conflict growing in tension and power that by the arrangement of God can of itself never come to a victory of the good over evil, but will only come to an end through the intervention of God in an apocalypse.

When we speak about development we must never think of it in an evolutionistic sense, as if there were development only as a result of immanent factors present in the world. We must think of the continuing action and influence of God in Christ through His Spirit and Word. That is therefore an influence, a power, with respect to which we bear our responsibility every moment. Our burden is to call upon that power of God in prayer, to receive it in faith, and to make all of our ability available for the impact of it in life and in the world. Thus when we accept the concept of development, our calling and responsibility are not obviated. Herein then we find the difference between this confession of development and evolutionism which only considers a development of existing immanent factors.

When we think evolutionistically, life can never become serious for us and we are not able to accept our responsibility fully. It means that what I did wrong today was necessary in the process of development; it was a product of the progressive development which is in its turn only a passage way to what is later and better. In this way there is not the responsibility for every moment, which does not return; history repeats itself continually in the sense that I can repeat the past later and do it better. That doing better is a necessary consequence of the advancing development.

Scripture cuts off the idea of evolutionism through the revelation of the coming crisis, the apocalypse, and the judgment. If a judgment is coming, my responsibility for every moment of my life and for every deed is thereby determined. There is not a necessary progressive development for perfection by means of internal powers, but we bear our own responsibility before God Who through His activity directs the development on earth. Judgment will be pronounced some day about the way in which we have known and exercised our responsibility. In connection with that revelation Scripture places great emphasis on the fact that things and moments exist only once. We can never repeat something, and in that sense history never repeats itself. Everything that happens takes place only once according to God's determination. Thus Scripture states: *Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment* (Hebr.9:27).

With that revelation a parallel is drawn between the dying of man and the sacrifice of Christ. Even as it has been determined that man should die once and then enter the judgment, so also Christ offered Himself once taking upon Himself the sins of many. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were repeated continually, and thus were real and factual, but not the reality and truth of grace; they were but a shadow. In the fact that the sacrifice of Christ was brought only once there is not only reality, but also the truth of grace. From this we are able to draw a comparison with the life and death of man.

If it could be repeated, if it could be done over again, it was indeed reality, but we could never experience the truth of the permanence of it, and we could never experience our responsibility in it nor could it ever be in earnest, and instead it remained a game. And then we could never experience in it the truth of God's grace. Precisely because it can be lived but one single time it makes life so immensely serious and presents our responsibility so starkly. The revelation that one day there will be a judgment reveals clearly that life on earth is lived only once and we bear the responsibility in it and for it. That coming judgment highlights our responsibility for every moment of this life.

Scripture reveals that it will be a judgment of the living and the dead, for those who will then still be living and for those who have already died; it will be for the believers as well as for the unbelievers. God's judgment applies to all people; and He will judge us for all the things we have done, and for all that we have been. That is not in disagreement with what the catechism teaches elsewhere (LD 15), that the believers will nevermore come into God's judgment. With this last expression is meant that God's sentence of condemnation will never be given to believers; the final judgment will be a

public declaration of righteousness for them. That does not take away however that their whole life will come into judgment, and a verdict will be issued about the way in which they have practiced their responsibility concerning the work of God's grace. As the apostle Paul writes: *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad* (2Cor.5:10).

There is also something that will survive in that judgment, and that will not be consumed by the fire of the sentence. We read that *each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire* (1Cor.3:13-15 NKJ). Paul distinguishes between the salvation of the person and that of his work. That must not be explained as if the one person is saved by grace, without any renewal of his life being evident, while the other person would be saved by the work found in his life. All are surely only saved by grace alone for Christ's sake, but that grace also produced a certain change of life as a consequence in all. We can never abstract a person from his life.

However, whatever was present in terms of renewal in a person's life was the fruit of the Spirit's work, the result of the impact of the Spirit of Christ in him. And thus we may never boast of ourselves, but only of the grace of Christ and its result. With the one person more of that work will be saved than with someone else. James writes: *Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!* (James 2:13). With that mercy that triumphs over judgment James does not mean God's mercy, but the mercy that we have practiced in the Name of Christ and by His power; this will endure in the judgment and triumph over judgment. Thus we can read in the Psalms: *For You, O God, tested us; You refined us like silver* (Ps.66:10), and Job said: *But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold* (Job 23:10).

There is something in believers that, no matter how contaminated with sin, still answers and responds to God's redeeming love. That is the result of the renewing work of the Spirit, but still is a response from believers – they have been renewed for such a response. In a broader sense we can also view the redemption of the world in such a perspective, as Peter writes: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare* (2Pet.3:10). There is an impact, an influence, of the result of Christ's cross on the entire human race and on the whole world; because God sees *the earth and everything in it* in this way, He will be able to spare it when *it will be laid bare*. That of course does not address the eternal salvation of all who have taken part in those labors. We repeat that we cannot abstract people from their works, for their works reveal their inclination; but conversely God is able to abstract the works of people from them because He views those works as the work of Christ, to which also the unbelievers in spite of themselves must contribute.

Believers however are able to live in their works, even if only in part. To that measure they are saved with their works. We read: *Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them."* (Rev.14:13). Being conscious of that coming judgment, the approaching criticism of Christ must make us aware of our responsibility for every moment of life. What is important is that our lives now and later will be saved by God in the judgment. Believers do not seek themselves but the glory of God; with that they know however that every day they live with the divine critique.

### ***Trepidation or Anticipation?***

In connection with this, the often considered question needs to be answered of whether we should look forward to the return of Christ with fear or with longing. This question cannot be answered with a single response. Also there is a sort of dread and fear in us for the moment when the divine judgment, the divine critique will be fully revealed about our entire life. When the books of the consciences will be opened we will become aware of much that we cannot justify, of much in which we have resisted God's grace. By faith we know that we will then be covered by Christ's righteousness. However, clearer than ever in this life, we will then be aware that it was all about the redemption of our whole life with all its activities; and we will admit our great shame in that judgment.

Over against this it is clear that there is something in us that responds to the love of God in Christ; and with respect to that there is a longing in us for the complete liberation and the crowning of that love in us. We may and must be fully

conscious of that work of Christ that He produced in us by His Word and Spirit, and also of our responding, reciprocal love. That awareness creates the yearning for the return of Christ and for the preservation of that love in such a future. Without that consciousness there can never be a longing for Christ's coming. The view that nothing in us and nothing of this world will be saved in the judgment of Christ, and according to which idea believers should nevertheless long for that judgment and to what lies behind it, is a delusion. We cannot long for what would be completely foreign for us and in total opposition with our present-day life.

We long for the permanent reward of what is currently within us. In that sense we read this answer: *I lift up my head and eagerly await as judge from heaven the very same person who before has submitted Himself to the judgment of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me. He will cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but He will take me and all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory.* It is here that the awareness comes to expression that all Christ's enemies have also become my enemies, and that through inward renewal I am on Christ's side and that also His victory signifies my victory.

With this we have not failed to do justice to the complete truth that we do not expect glory for ourselves and do not merely anticipate and desire a kingdom of blessedness, but we expect Christ and the glory of God in Him. The expectation of the future often meant for many the expectation of personal bliss and happiness. If that were indeed the Christian expectation, it would not be far removed from many pagan expectations. A mere Christian tint is not really typical of our Christian expectation; for we expect Christ – and Christ is in the first place the revelation of the glory of God.

When we seek God, our dearest desire is that His glory may be seen and that the splendor of His exalted majesty may be displayed unhindered. When we pray for the coming of His kingdom we do not in the first place have in mind the restoration of all things for our pleasure, but the active authority and dominion of God in all its exaltation. That does not take away that the appearance of the glory of God's dominion envisions and includes the restoration of all things and the victory of His church. One could in reaction to improper expectations of the future posit another extreme view, and lose sight of that restoration entirely. The conclusion of history indicates the completion of God's covenant. In a covenant there are always two parties, and in this covenant the most intimate communion and fellowship between the two parties was established; and thus the pristine revelation of God's majesty also means the glorification of the creature.

This two-pronged nature of our expectation consists particularly in this that we look forward to Christ. One the one hand He is as the eternal Word the full revelation of God, and on the other hand He has as the incarnate Word, as true man, brought to light everything that God has placed in man. In Him the two parties are one. In Him is the fullness of God's love that went out to us, but in Him is also fully present the demanded reciprocal love. With respect to this last He has as our Representative and our Head stood in our place and with His satisfaction has paid for us. That could produce the thought that from this present world nothing would be saved, and with Christ one day an entirely new world would appear. It is in this way that in some circles the future of Christ is indeed envisioned.

God said something similar to Moses in connection with Israel's sin at the foot of Sinai: *Now leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation* (Exod.32:10). It was then that the mediator of the Old Covenant prayed: *Why should the Egyptians say, It was with evil intent that He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth? Turn from Your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on Your people* (Exod.32:12). We should view matters in no other way with respect to our expectations of the future. If nothing would be saved of this world, and if God out of Christ would produce an entirely different world, then surely God's labors for His church in all the centuries would have been in vain, and the honor of the Name of the LORD would be obscured.

Now of course Christ is our righteousness before God; but He also wished to live in all of His own and with this bring about the initial restoration of their lives. Thus what He accomplished in this way will be saved and glorified in the future. Therefore on the one hand the appearance of Christ brings the full glory of God's revelation, and on the other hand it brings the redemption and glorification of the creature. We expect the splendor of God's active authority and reign and at the same time the condition of the blessedness of the creatures who are redeemed in Christ. With respect to the relationship between those two we note that we seek God's glory and thus discover our salvation.

Therefore our expectation of Christ as the incarnate Word means a looking forward to of Him as Mediator and Redeemer, as the Officebearer. There is also a longing for Jesus personally; we long to be able finally to see Him. This longing is expressed in the plea we read in Scripture: *The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!"* (Rev.22:17). This is the prayer of the Spirit and the bride, and in it is thus expressed the desire of the bride. And yet we need to be careful with this! The longing for Jesus is never separated from the longing for Him as Mediator, as the Officebearer, and as the Christ. A wrong sentiment that entertains unreal things could lead us off the proper track. The personal bond with Jesus exists in this that He is our Head, and that we are incorporated in Him and live out of Him; what some people might invent in addition to this, is vain and futile. This, however, that He is our Head and that we are in Him, provides the most intimately personal bond. It is in this way that our expectation of Him gives us the greatest joy: we will see Jesus, but then for us He is the Lord Jesus, that is, Jesus Who is Lord.

That He as Christ is our Head means that He can also be Judge. And because He is our Head, God has appointed Him as Judge. Once He *submitted Himself to the judgment of God for my sake, and removed all the curse from me*. Because He removed our curse, He also wanted to restore our life in God's blessing. And yet, how much some people have hindered and opposed that grace! Christ will judge who receives that grace and who does not. In the complete rejection of that grace by unbelievers, they repeat and demonstrate once more the rejection of God's favor in paradise. Therefore Christ will *cast them into everlasting condemnation*. That will be the victory of the justice of God's love. If we rejoice over that judgment it will be because of God's will and because of the conquest of His justice!

When we add to this the joy and gladness because of the victory over our enemies, we need to keep in mind that they are *His and my enemies*; they are my enemies because they are His enemies. Should we have personal feelings of revenge, we would create a chasm between Christ and us. In all of Scripture it is maintained and in Christ's Sermon on the Mount it also becomes clear that there is no place for personal feelings of vengeance or retribution. If we did, we would never be able to expect the return of Christ with a truly spiritual longing. In this life we must already choose: all of Christ's enemies must be ours also; and that produces already now a radical separation. The principle remains however, that they are our enemies because they are Christ's enemies.

Even though the return of Christ brings the divine judgment and its critique over our own life, and therefore we look up against that judgment, yet the prevailing desire nevertheless is to anticipate His return with joy. God's victory must be seen as the restoration of the creation in glory. The kingdom of God will be revealed fully, and for us it is all the more reason for overwhelming joy rather than fear when we read of the new Jerusalem: *Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life* (Rev.21:27). We rejoice therefore for God's sake but also for ours.

## ***THE TRUE FAITH***

**S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

### **Lord's Day 20**

#### **53. What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit?**

*First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God. Second, He is also given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever.*

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#### ***The Holy Spirit***

The third part of the Apostles Creed is about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. In this description it is evident that the confession is about the Holy Spirit and His work. Related to this is also the fact that the answer of LD 20 is divided into two parts: *First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God. Second, He is also given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever.* Thus what we confess here first is who the Holy Spirit is in God and after that what His work is.

We will have to consider both parts of this third section of the Apostles Creed; but then we must indeed see them as two sides of our confession. We cannot separately speak about the Person of the Holy Spirit and then about His work, for the Holy Spirit cannot be known apart from His work. That is connected with what we said earlier and in general about God, namely that we are not able to know God as He is in Himself, apart from His relationship to His creatures. We only know God in His relationship with His creation. Through Scripture we do know who God is, but not what God is. That means that we do know who God is for us and for all creatures, but we are not able to give a definition, a concept of God that would express what God is like in Himself.

Therefore, if we should wish to speak about God in the abstract, that is, separate from His relationship to the creation, it would remain a pointless consideration. And thus we are only able to confess something about the Holy Spirit in connection with His work, that is, in His relationship to the creatures and to creation. Moreover, Scripture does not speak concerning the creation or the creatures as such, but about the creation in its relationship to God. We need to view the activities or functions therefore constantly as those of the Holy Spirit, but in considering them we must not lose sight of the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, what is stated here first is Who the Holy Spirit eternally is in God: *He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God.* We also confess that He proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son. And especially when we say that this is an eternal action of the Holy Spirit, it is evident that it surpasses His relationship with what is created. Having noted this we are able to confess that the Spirit goes out to the world and to believers, since there also is an eternal action of the Spirit that exists without the creation. There is internally within God an eternal procession of the Spirit. Therefore our confession must be based on this understanding of the Spirit, that He proceeds eternally from the Father to the Son, and also eternally from the Son to the Father. We seek to understand a little more clearly what we have received in this revelation. And we need to focus especially on the question of whether in this revelation we have come to know what God is like within Himself, apart from His relationship to the creation.

In order to understand that we do need to see at the same time just what it is we have received in this revelation. First of all, it is immediately clear that this revelation about the proceeding of the Holy Spirit does not give us any information

with which to form a definition. Also this revelation with respect to the personal existence of God, of the personal existence of God in the Holy Spirit does not tell us what God is, but Who He is. In it however is revealed Who the Holy Spirit is in God and what the relationship of this Person is to both other Persons. Everything in God is totally and completely personal, and that should put us on guard for any and every abstraction.

In this revelation, moreover, we are told what the relationship of the Holy Spirit is to both other Persons in the divine Being. The church has perceived that revelation especially in the name of the Holy Spirit. He is called Spirit or breath; and on the basis of this the church speaks of a proceeding of the Holy Spirit. As noted above, He proceeds eternally from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father. The Son is eternally from the Father, but in the Spirit the Father eternally knows and loves the Son, and the Son eternally knows and loves the Father. Christ refers to that mutual and jealous love with these words: *All things have been committed to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him* (Matt.11:27). In considering this the church has sought to account for the fact that the Spirit is almost always called the “Holy” Spirit. In the Holy Spirit the Father is constantly focused on the Son and the Son on the Father. In the Holy Spirit the Father and the Son love one another eternally. Thus through the Holy Spirit there is for the Father and the Son an eternal knowing and a being open to one another, for *the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God* (1Cor.2:10). In addition, the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit are eternally interacting with each other and are completely sufficient for one another.

The question now is why God reveals these things to us in His Word. Does He do this in order that we should know what God really is like in Himself? Already in reflecting on the above we had the sense that we were at the borderline of what reverence and adoration would allow us. Adoration does not increase when we would wish to know everything that is in God – on the contrary, it would diminish and dissipate. When Scripture reveals something to us of the continual relations of the three Persons in God, it shows us this in order to reveal God’s self-sufficiency. That revelation is directly related to the relationship that God has with us and we with God and is thus not deduced from it. We need to be aware that God is not dependent on us in any way, for as the apostle Paul states, *He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else* (Acts 17:25).

Moreover, we learn to understand through this – and it is directly related to it – that God is not absorbed in the work of His hands, but that He remains exalted far above it. Of course there is for us a close connection between God and His works, because outside of those works we would not be able to know Him; and yet at the same time He remains the transcendent God. That has especially significance with respect to the confession of the Holy Spirit, because mysticism readily loses sight of that particularly in connection with the Holy Spirit. For such mysticism the Holy Spirit quite easily is merged with His works, or conversely the actions are identified with the Holy Spirit. On the one hand the leading and experience of the Spirit are then considered as the Spirit Himself, so that these people are wrapped up in the contemplation of their own lives with the result that the worship of the transcendent God ceases. On the other hand, it is possible that one sees himself as completely engaged and enveloped in the Spirit so that the boundary between himself and the Holy Spirit is lost sight of, and one deifies himself to such a degree that it ends in a pantheistic identification with the Spirit. Over against this Scripture reveals Who the Spirit eternally is in God, in order that we constantly are aware of the boundary between Him, Whose creatures we are, and us. There is something within the relationship of the three Persons that we must never ever want to invade.

And yet – this is the third thing we can mention with respect to this – there is also something in that mutual and reciprocal relationship of the Persons in God that fills us with delight. Behind what God is for us there is always what God eternally is in Himself. There is nothing accidental nor arbitrary in what God is for us; God truly gives Himself to us in this, but it does have an eternal background or context in what God eternally is in Himself. To say this specifically in connection with the Spirit: the Spirit of love lives in us, but He is that Spirit Who is also eternally the love in God. Thus we do not receive in the Spirit just something from God, that is, one of His blessings, but in His love He seeks to give Himself to us. This is the treasure we have especially in the gift of the Spirit. Related to this is that only in the New Testament when the event of the coming of the Spirit has taken place, something more fully has been revealed about God’s Triune nature. During the Old Testament, and thus before the outpouring of the Spirit, God’s people could not yet be aware of these matters.

From all of this it is evident that what the Scriptures reveal to us about God's Trinity and thus also what it says about the Holy Spirit in God, there is nothing abstract about which we could have profound but unfruitful speculations. Everything has been revealed to us so that we would rightly know God's relationship to us, and in order that in this we would know God. We do not merely look at these factors, and yet do not really know them; for we do know them and they determine our relationship with God. It is true that they are lofty and far beyond us, but they also have their influence in our lives; they are both transcendent and immanent.

Thus we know the Holy Spirit as exalted far beyond us, but also as dwelling within our hearts. Being transcendent and immanent at the same time reflects therefore immediately that the Holy Spirit is a Person. In the word "person" both elements are present; namely, as a person everyone is differentiated from his works and exists beyond them, but as a person he also has influence and is related to others and lives as it were in others. It is also in this way that we make profession of the Person of the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed: *we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life*. In His being *Lord* we note His transcendence, and in being the *Giver of life* we observe His immanence.

It is almost superfluous to mention that we know the Holy Spirit only through faith. However, with this we also maintain that we do not know any abstract things concerning the Holy Spirit; for we are unable to believe what is exclusively exalted above us, what does not affect us, and is only remote for us. Faith always means entering into or having a certain relationship with God. Faith is an enemy of the abstract. We are not able to believe in the Holy Spirit except as the Spirit Who also makes us holy. Outside of that relationship we know nothing about the Holy Spirit. In faith there is always a personally appropriating and making it mine. And yet there exists in faith also, and even in the first place, worship and awe. Without that fear there is also no faith.

It is also this way that when we confess *I believe in the Holy Spirit* both the transcendent and the immanent realities of the Holy Spirit have been confirmed. And also affirmed is the fact that we may not separate the first and the second half of this answer from each other. Thus we confess: *First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God. Second, He is also given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever*. Moreover, we also confess that *All this we know both from the testimonies of Holy Scripture and from the respective works of the three Persons, and especially those we perceive in ourselves* (Belg.Conf.art.9).

### ***Our Sanctification***

In connection with the activities of the Holy Spirit the following are mentioned in the Apostles Creed: *a holy catholic Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting*. These are all listed under the designation: "our sanctification." It is self-evident that with this we should not merely think of sanctification in a narrow sense, that is, the sanctification of the lives of believers, but in a broader sense, namely of the sanctification of all that is created. After all, the resurrection of the body and eternal life in its splendor are included in this.

It is very easy to connect the thought of sin to this. And then we conceive of sanctification as the cleansing of the world from sin and its consequences. Without a doubt this understanding is correct, for this sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus Scripture can speak about *the renewal of all things* (Matt.19:28), which is particularly the work of the Spirit.

Nevertheless we must not limit our consideration to this, because in this way we would not be able to understand the concept of sanctification. We would see it then only negatively as the purging from sin; it is however to be characterized positively as a focusing on God, a dedicating to God. God's holiness is the characteristic by which He eternally is Himself and maintains Himself. Sanctifying means then to bring that attribute to expression in what is created. All things must be directed to God and find their purpose in Him. Therefore, we are able to speak of a sanctification by the Spirit apart from sin. We take note of the fact that the Holy Spirit also participated in the work of creating; and also the Holy Spirit said: *Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness* (Gen.1:26)! From the very beginning this meant a sanctifying of what was created. Through the work of the Holy Spirit the words *to Him* from Romans 11: 36 came to embodiment at the creation. Through this the natural endowment as well as the direction of creation – especially of man and all creation as recapitulated in man – was determined.

It is of particular significance that we take note of this. For many proceed from the idea of a contrast, a dualism between nature and Spirit. When such a dualism is viewed as original, it militates against the revelation of Scripture that nature is also created by the Holy Spirit. The natural is by virtue of its original inclination and direction at the same time spiritual. When seen in this way no contradistinction between the natural and the spiritual can exist, and the natural does not cause us to be remote from God, for in the natural we must be close to God and through the Spirit are able.

Of course Scripture does make a distinction between the originally created life and the life yet to be glorified. Thus the apostle Paul wrote: *The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual* (1Cor.15:46), in which the word “psychical” is translated as natural, and “pneumatical” as spiritual. This translation gave support to the misconception that originally there was an antithesis between the natural and the spiritual. With the psychical as designation for the originally created life, Scripture indicates the provisional of the original situation; creation was not yet glorified but instead it still awaited its glorification. Even without sin a change and increase in glory would have taken place; the *psychical* needed to be glorified to the *pneumatical*. And that the original setting was a temporary one coincided with the decision that had to be taken by man, the choice that still needed to be made. Man could still fall into sin.

All of this will be worked out more fully subsequently when we consider the glorification by the Spirit. What is at issue now is that the natural as such does not constitute the opposite of the spiritual. Of course it is true that this entire world fell in man; is turned away from God and in disposition is corrupted, and for that reason in Scripture the natural is often seen in opposition to the spiritual. But that does not exist in the natural as such. Instead, the natural again needs to be sanctified to God by the Spirit and thus at the same time become truly spiritual.

If then the specific work of the Holy Spirit is the sanctification of all that is created and directing this to God, then what belongs to this is the opening up of all that is in nature, the bringing to light the treasure that is contained in the world and in life. Therefore the development of the world throughout history is specifically the work of the Holy Spirit. Through God’s love in the Son as the eternal Word, a comprehensive treasure of gifts is contained in this world, which is being brought to light by the Spirit in the course of history. Thus the entire development of culture may be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit. With this however the Holy Spirit does not lose sight of His sanctifying work. In the progressing culture there is an unlocking and opening up of the treasures of the world for God, in order that He as the Creator would be glorified in it, so that His love which He has for His children may especially be seen in this. That objective remains a priority with the Holy Spirit in the developing of the world, also when many participate in this process who do not recognize God in it. Also because of their opposition to this sanctifying work of the Spirit, many who have participated in the developing culture but did not dedicate it to the Lord will be judged one day. This unrighteousness of people does not prevent the glorification of God’s Name in the developing of culture.

When we see sanctification by the Spirit as the dedication to God of what is created, we must not forget in this that this devotion from man’s side can only mean that we are responding to what God has given; it is a dedication in reciprocating love that has been aroused in us by God’s love. Thus communicating God’s love to us also belongs to the work of sanctification by the Spirit. This love that goes out to us from the Father through the Son is placed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This takes place because in His Word He testifies to us of that love, and because He makes us understand that love in all of creation and also in the direction of our own life. However, in our nature corrupted by sin a great distance exists between God’s love and our heart. Thus the Holy Spirit must not only cause our heart to be born again so that it is capable of receiving that love, but He must also by His Word and His guidance bring it ever closer to us and disclose it to our heart. It is in this way that He leads us in all things.

And thus we have once again involved the cleansing and renewing activity of the Spirit in the work of sanctification. For sanctifying by the Spirit now means a recreation, an altering and reversing the direction in which all of creation led by man is moving. That change begins then centrally in the heart of man, but if man truly is the head of the world, it has as objective the restoration of all of creation. This renewing work of the Holy Spirit had its beginning immediately after the fall into sin and will have its conclusion, its completion in the future of Christ. The question is however to what measure we can speak of a completion. Is there a continuing process of sanctification that once will reach its achievement?

When we consider the work of the Spirit from this point of view, namely that He brings to manifestation everything that once at creation was conferred upon the world, we can truly speak of a process. There is a constant development of culture, no matter how much culture's rise and decline may alternate with each other, for with those changes there is still a certain continuity observable. That applies not only to science and technology, to law and arts, the formation of various relations in life such as the state, society, family and marriage, the conditions of life in general, but there is also evident an ever more intense relationship between people through which it becomes constantly clearer what is in the hearts of men.

When we view the work of the Holy Spirit from this perspective, we can indeed speak of development and we can also understand how the Holy Spirit is able to make use of many unbelieving and rebellious people in spite of themselves for the glorification of God's Name. And thus we realize that at one time there will be a completion of this. The moment of Christ's return is related to this development. This process thus must come to a certain fruition and maturity before Christ can return.

It is of course totally different when we focus on the renewing work of the Spirit. We are able to observe a certain difference between the Old and the New Testament, but there is also development in the history of redemption. That becomes evident in three things. In the first place, the veil was torn with the death of Christ, and God so to speak came out of concealment and separation into the open, and now through the Holy Spirit we are daily able to come to God with everything. That points to a more intimate fellowship with God than was possible in the Old Testament. In the second place, Israel lived in isolation from the other nations and was subject to many prohibitions, and thus the people of God did not yet have full use of all that was created in order to consecrate that to the Lord. Also in this a change came with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And finally in the New Testament the law of the Lord comes to us in a different form than it came to the people of Israel. One needs only think of the marriage commandment, of the tolerance concerning polygamy, of the freedom to send a letter of divorce in connection with the hardness of heart, and on what Christ says of these things!

Thus it is possible to discern a certain progress in the history of redemption and therefore an advance in the work of sanctification. God Himself speaks of that progress when He points to the difference between the old and the new covenant: *This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more* (Jer.31:33,34).

This prophecy does envision the completion of all things, but already with the coming of the new covenant it began to be fulfilled. This change which came with the New Testament brought the possibility of progress in sanctification in breadth and in depth. The question is however to what degree that possibility became a reality for the members of God's people. When we consider their personal lives, we note that sometimes there can be evidence of greater obedience of faith with Old Testament believers than with New Testament believers in their altered circumstances. The change of circumstances and with that the possibilities called for a deepening and intensification of the responsibility; but to what measure have we really seen that responsibility assumed in the New Testament?

Viewed in this way it certainly remains questionable whether we are able to speak of progress in sanctification. Related to this is the question of whether one can really speak of progress in sanctification among mankind in general. For surely the church also has the calling to exercise her influence toward the outside. When we consider that question we do have to come to a negative conclusion. The world distances itself from the life of obedience, with a continuing profanation of life taking place. It appears that the world in spite of the call of the gospel is becoming increasingly more demonic.

It is therefore difficult to think of the sanctification of the world as a constantly continuing process. More likely this will come at one point in time with the return of Christ. And yet it would be one-sided if we focused all our attention on the end time and forgot that the Holy Spirit already has come for sanctification. The sanctification of the world in the day of Christ is being prepared through the course of the centuries, namely in the contrast the Holy Spirit creates here, the disparity between what is holy and what is unholy. In the book of Revelation we read: *Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy*

*continue to be holy* (Rev.22:11). The Holy Spirit produces a constantly growing tension between what is holy and what is unholy in the world. Through this a crisis is produced for which the descent of the new Jerusalem will be the solution.

From this it becomes evident that the sanctifying work of the Spirit is a matter of faith. Through faith we have undoubtedly part in that sanctification; but we share in it by a faith that the Holy Spirit observes, and knows that He has not been given to this world in vain. However, we do not in the first place consider the work of the Holy Spirit but the Person. Moreover, the crisis is quickened by the hope that is present in faith. The words we just quoted follow the vision of the coming down of the heavenly Jerusalem. The hope in the complete holiness of the life in that city enables us to reach out to that holiness. We are saved in hope. Even if the hope that is seen is no longer hope, yet in principle we share in that holiness from which the hope emanates.

### ***Pentecost***

The decisive moment in the work of the Holy Spirit was when He was poured out. We must attempt to understand something of that occasion. The question of the meaning of Pentecost is one of the most difficult matters to consider for the church. We are able to say that never before a satisfactory answer has been provided, for especially at this point all our considerations have been a matter of trying.

As an introductory observation we want to say that with the outpouring of the Spirit there was a certain subordination of the Spirit. He let Himself be sent by Christ in the Name of the Father. There is a subordination of the Son to the Father, so that the Son can be called the Servant of the LORD, and Christ is able to speak about God as His God. In the same way there is a subordination of the Holy Spirit to the Son. With emphasis we need to say that such subordination exists only in connection with God's work with and in the world.

That subordination was already present in the creating and preserving work of the world. In connection with this the Son can already be called the Word of God or the Wisdom of God that the LORD possessed or created in the beginning of His ways. Thus we read: *The LORD brought Me forth as the first of His works, before His deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began* (Prov.8:22,23). The bringing forth of Wisdom indicates the position that the Son received in connection with the creation of the world. Thus of the Spirit of God it can be said that He hovered over the waters in the outworking of creation according to the counsel of God. Especially in connection with the redemption of the world Scripture speaks of that subordination of the Son to the Father and of the Holy Spirit to the Son. However, apart from God's work for and in the world, and thus with respect to the internal relationship of the three Persons, we may never speak of any subordination. Then the words of the Athanasian Creed are pertinent: *And in this Trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less* (Art.25).

Related to this subordination is the fact that we can never understand Pentecost if we would only pay attention to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has been sent to carry out the work of the Son in the same way that the Son does everything according to the will of the Father. And with the work of the Father we need to think of the fact that God in Christ was reconciling the world to Himself, as we read in the letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians, namely that God in Christ was again gathering all things into one, bringing all things together under one Head. We read: *And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment -- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one Head, even Christ* (Eph.1:9,10).

Mankind and the world were separated and splintered by sin because the head Adam fell away; but in Christ as the second Adam the unity was restored. The Son became flesh and thus was appointed by the Father as the new Head, while the Holy Spirit carries out the work of gathering together as He specifically engrafts the elect into Christ, but He is also the link in every fellowship. The engrafting into Christ entails regeneration and the renewal of life. If this is the starting point with the consideration of the work of the Holy Spirit, individualism will never be able to come to a proper understanding of it. Individualism has always appealed to and justified itself with the Holy Spirit in order to be able to refer to the personal life while disregarding the communal fellowship. This happened because they did not consider the work of the Holy Spirit as the fulfilling of the work of the Son, which in turn was not seen as carrying out the Father's

will. Consistent individualism rejects therefore eventually the work of the Son, the reconciliation through His blood, and the restoration of unity in Him.

It is from this perspective that the difference between the Old and the New Testament needs to be approached. There cannot be any doubt that already during the Old Testament the Holy Spirit performed His restoring work. Then also there was regeneration and renewal through the Spirit. His work at that time however could not be other than provisional and preparatory for the authentic reality that was to come. Even as there was forgiveness of sins in view of the atonement that would occur, in the same way there was also regeneration in light of the engrafting into Christ that would take place. And thus the gospel could not yet be revealed fully. Paul also speaks of *the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints* (Col.1:26), namely the unity in Christ, the restoration of mankind as a body of which Christ is the Head. That the gospel could not yet fully be revealed, and the engrafting in Christ could not take place yet, had various consequences, all of which indicate the temporary character of the Old Testament.

Scripture reveals about Christ that *God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished* (Rom.3:25). A different word than normal is used here for “forgiveness.” The NIV does not use “forgiveness” but “forbearance.” In His forbearance God had not punished the sins and had not punished them among His people eternally in view of the atonement and reconciliation that would come later. The regular sacrifices needed to symbolize and point to the necessity of that atonement. The people could not yet take refuge in what had taken place once for all time.

For that reason God could not yet grant His people His full and permanent peace; He still dwelled in darkness behind the veil, and there was still a distance between Him and the people who could never enter the Holy of Holies. They still lived in the spirit of servitude and had not yet received the Spirit of Sonship concerning which Paul writes: *For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father"* (Rom.8:15). A fellowship between God and us revealed in the New Testament as the dwelling of God in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, did not yet exist in the Old Testament. God always remained in measure a God from afar. In the relationship between God and man there was yet a waiting for the atonement. Only when that had taken place could a permanent peace come.

When we spoke of the dwelling of God within our hearts, we already implied another result of Christ's coming. Christ is filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit dwells in Him so that there is a permanent harmony between the will of the Spirit and the will of His own heart. Those two are one. It is in this way that we attempt to express somewhat how we understand that indwelling of the Spirit. Through Christ and in fellowship with Him that indwelling of the Spirit is now also given to us. This was also still lacking during the Old Testament times. Before the veil was torn, God lived in the Holy of Holies in the midst of His people; but the people could not yet speak of a dwelling within their hearts. Of course there was the regeneration by the Spirit, but because the gospel of peace could not yet fully be proclaimed, the renewed heart could not yet fully experience it. The gospel still came to the people with obscurity, and faith remained bound to the shadows; and therefore the hearts of the believers could not yet obtain full liberty, the voluntary agreement with the will of the Spirit. God was not yet making His home in the hearts through the Spirit. God constantly approached His people from without.

That God's love in the Son did not yet live in the hearts by His Spirit had the result that still much in the heart and life of man remained private and closed. In the relationship with God as well as in that with one another and also in our relation with the whole world, we are only able to give ourselves completely in God's love. Scripture speaks about the situation in the Old Testament in terms of the church in her adolescent years. Many things needed to remain dormant that only could blossom spiritually in the New Testament. That was also the reason for Israel's separation with respect to the other nations. In the spiritual realm it could not yet handle a battle with the whole world, for it had not yet arrived at the age of maturity. Israel did not yet have the indwelling of the Spirit through which it would receive its own spiritual principle by which it could develop a spiritual maturity and would be able to deal with the competition of the spiritual world powers.

Related to this is also the difference in the covenant provision. The LORD'S covenant has now received its fulfillment in the unity of life with Christ through the Spirit. That also is the reason the covenant is mentioned much less frequently in the New Testament than in the Old. God's covenant is now in the unity of life with Christ much more self-evident. During the Old Testament when the engrafting in Christ could not exist yet, and everyone was born again individually

anticipating the future incorporation, all emphasis needed to be placed on the fact that believers were bound together through the covenant that took in all of them.

There is yet another matter connected with this, namely the great emphasis on generations and on the nation in the covenant, so that the covenant was even for a long time limited to one people, and the spiritual and national coincided. Sectarianism presumes that in place of the national unity, instead of the unity in ancestry and family the spiritual unity in Christ has come. It lets go of the covenant and infant baptism for that reason, and is based on an individualistic perspective. Yet sectarianism has overlooked one important factor. It has severed the spiritual unity in Christ and the unity by family and ancestry, and has not taken into account the original relationship between covenant fellowship and blood relationship.

However, God certainly intended to establish a covenant relationship and for this purpose He created the blood-fellowship or family connection. He intended that all of us should be included in the covenant with Adam as our head, and for that reason He made all of us to be born from him as our father. But now in place of Adam, Christ has been appointed as our Head, yet the significance of the relationship of blood has not passed away nor expired. Scripture reveals that when it states with emphasis that Christ has shared our flesh and blood. And for that reason now also in the New Testament the generations are included in the covenant, and that the covenant also includes the nations as may be seen from 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* (Matt.28:19).

Israel's mistake was that it considered the national affiliation and the descent from Adam as all-important, and lost sight of the fact that that blood-fellowship only receives its value through the underlying covenant fellowship, which is and ought to be one of faith. Thus John the Baptist warns the Jews: *And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham* (Matt.3:9). And Paul observes: *For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children* (Rom.9:6,7). Nevertheless, it is clear that also for Israel the blood-fellowship and the birth from Abraham has not lost all significance in the New Testament, as Paul notes: *If the part of the dough offered as first fruits (Abraham and the other patriarchs) is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root (Abraham) is holy, so are the branches* (Rom.11:16).

The fault of Israel was that it focused one-sidedly on the family relationship; which is also the error of sectarianism as it views faith fellowship in Christ one-sidedly; both lose sight of the mutual relationship between that twofold fellowship. It is also clear now that it is improper to place undue emphasis on the establishment of the covenant with Abraham; that covenant establishment is only one of the moments in the historical revelation of the covenant. Behind this is found the covenant of grace with Christ as Head. With respect to the significance of Pentecost, we repeat that the covenant of grace has received its fulfillment in the engrafting of the believers into Christ.

The new covenant also meant that in keeping with God's promise the law was written on the heart of the believers. During the Old Testament the law came externally, was expressed mainly in the form of prohibitions to the people, intended to oppose the sins and control them, and served the function of tutors and attendants of underage children. In the New Testament the gospel of Jesus Christ about the atonement through His blood and the engrafting in Him, could be fully revealed. Now a better contact was established between the changed heart and the full preaching of the gospel. Because the gospel could be understood better, clearer insight in the significance of the law was also possible. For the law intends not only to counter sin, but also to change us positively so that from the start all desires and all of life's experiences develop in agreement with it.

This improved understanding of the law was also possible because it came in a different form. The inhibiting and deterring character of the law in the Old Testament was channeled through the development of the moral regulations in the ceremonial and civic laws, in which there was much that restricted and overpowered life. That form has been removed from the law and in the New Testament it comes to us in its original format. And now the law could be written on the heart. That writing of the law on the hearts of people is not something the Holy Spirit does to us immediately, but this takes place by means of the preaching of the law whereby the changed heart is able to understand the marvel of the law. Also because the gospel has now been revealed fully and the law can now have complete interaction with the born again heart, a fellowship between God and us is possible and is demonstrated by God dwelling in our hearts.

In connection with this there is yet another consequence of the Pentecost event. Because the church through the presence of the Spirit within her has received her own life's principle, she can take her position in the world. And when the law, restored to its original format, has been written on the hearts of believers, the church must again take part in all of life. That does not only mean that the separation of God's people from other people has been removed, but also that the many restrictions and prohibitions that had been imposed on Israel, have ended. Through Christ the curse on the earth has been removed in principle; and there are now no longer any unclean animals, no profane places or times that constantly need to teach us how the curse still rests on the earth. The sacred is not found in a special part of life, since all of life must be holy to the Lord, *for everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving* (1Tim.4:4).

For believers the whole world is once again their domain. And with this the kingdom of God has come in principle. With respect to the kingdom of God we always need to be aware of two relationships: that of believers to God, and their relationship to all that is created. With Pentecost a change came to both relationships. Through the presence of the Spirit Who brought the true peace of God through the reconciliation in Christ and the writing on our hearts of the law of the Lord, our hearts in their expressions can again be holy to the Lord. That means the rule of God in His kingdom over our hearts, and thus He not only comes to us externally, but He rules over us because He dwells within us. Moreover, believers are now also able to rule over all creation, what for now also comes out in the fact that they may use the world again. Thus the kingdom of God has come in principle. We always need to note that this is true only in principle. The rule of God by His Spirit in our hearts is still disturbed by sin, and the dominion of believers over creation is still not complete.

With all of this, however, the meaning of Pentecost has not been entirely exhausted. The Spirit brings not only the sanctification, but also the glorification of the world. He does not lead us back to paradise but ahead to the end of God's ways. Therefore in Scripture the Spirit is also called the Spirit of glory, and we read that *if you are insulted because of the Name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you* (1Pet.4:14). That He is called the Spirit of glory means that some day He will convey to us God's glory, and will redress the insult we now suffer. With the glory of being children of God also comes the glorification of all that is created. That glorification according to Scripture is related directly to the outpouring of the Spirit. The prophet Joel speaks of it in this way: *And afterward, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD* (Joel 2:28-31).

With the outpouring of the Spirit the glorification of all creation is put into motion; all that is needed for that glorification is given with the outpouring of the Spirit; nothing new needs to be added to it. We wait only for the time and the moment. That is why Scripture calls the time beginning with Pentecost the last days. Our life is now one of perpetual crisis. With that we do not deny that there is still an ongoing process of ripening for the judgment; but it is a process of great tension in preparation for the final phase for which all the necessary ingredients have been provided with Pentecost. In the first place it was necessary that the decision for mankind was taken. In paradise Adam, and humanity in him still stood before the decision. Connected with this the fact that his condition was still a natural one ("psychical" 1Cor.15:46), that is, a provisional one.

In Christ the decision has been made for mankind; the Holy Spirit now gives us the incorporation with Christ, and we may experience in all things the obedience to God that now is assured in that decision of Christ. And thus we may be truly spiritual people in everything. Necessarily related to this is the fact that also the condition of our lives and of the whole world is becoming a spiritual one ("pneumatical" 1Cor.15:46). Thus all requirements for the glorification are present. The future glorification therefore controls and directs the life of the present time. The history of our life and of the whole world can now be read in reverse: from the future to the present, and the light of the coming future glory may be seen. In that history the coming glory can be anticipated and prepared for, and already now exercises its influence. God gloriously satisfies all of our urgent needs, so that like this one day His glory will appear.

For all of this the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. For this purpose He came with the sign of a powerful windstorm that overcame all resistance that was present in our nature. Moreover, for this purpose He also came with the

sign of fire that sanctifies and glorifies our nature. In addition He came with the sign of speaking in strange languages. Now there is an understanding of things that during the Old Testament were still hidden, and the unity of life with Christ Jesus through the incorporation in Him is not connected with the national community, and instead the covenant of the Lord can embrace the life of all nations.

### ***The Spirit of Christ***

In the above reflections it was assumed and mentioned several times that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. We need to consider this more concretely now. In Scripture the Spirit is called this several times, as we read here: *Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."* (Gal.4:6). Elsewhere we read that *if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ* (Rom.8:9). In various other places Scripture also speaks in this way.

That the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ cannot be limited to specific relationships in which we interact with the Spirit so that at one time He would be the Spirit of Christ, and on another the Spirit of God in general without that particular relation to Christ. We cannot know anything about God without Christ; that is, to know anything of God in love and to know it in such a way that we are related to it and acknowledge and adore Him in it. In the same way also we know nothing of the Spirit outside of Christ. Everywhere and in all His work He must be for us the Spirit of Christ; otherwise we would not be able to meet Him in faith and adoration. The confession of the Spirit of Christ as the Spirit Who redeems our life cannot be separated from what we confess concerning the Spirit in general.

If we saw the Spirit only as the Spirit of Christ in connection with our own life, we would not recognize nor understand all the other work the Spirit does in the world; and even though we possessed that Spirit we would essentially be strangers in this world. It cannot be denied that the boasting of having the Spirit, especially in mystical circles, makes many of them not understand the work of God in the world. The reason for this is always the fact that they do not acknowledge the Spirit in His work in the world as the Spirit of Christ.

Yet when we read in Scripture: *When You send Your Spirit, they are created, and You renew the face of the earth* (Ps.104:30), it is the LORD, the God of the covenant, the God Who in Christ is God of His people, Who is meant. In verse 24 of the same Psalm we read: *How many are Your works, O LORD! In wisdom You made them all; the earth is full of Your creatures.* The works of the LORD, of Him Who in Christ is our God and our Father, is praised here. Thus in verse 31 the words immediately follow: *May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in His works.* It is impossible that this believer as he writes would feel himself as a stranger in the world around him in his adoration of the LORD as his God and Father – the same God Who as his Redeemer in the covenant he now meets in all the world happenings. Thus we must acknowledge the LORD the God of the covenant in all His works in the world. This also means that we see the Spirit in all His works as the Spirit of the Father in Christ, and thus also as the Spirit of Christ. It is the redeeming Spirit Whom we adore in all His works.

Behind this there must yet be something else. If the Spirit in all His works is the Spirit of Christ, of the incarnate Word, then there must be behind this that with the creation of the world He was the Spirit of the Son, the Spirit of the eternal Word. We read in Scripture: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:1-3). If the eternal Word in Whom God expressed all His love principally is the Creator of the world, and He thus made that love the main theme of the whole work of creation, He has in that love accomplished all things through the Spirit.

Through the Spirit all things in man were directed to God and therefore could be a response to the love of God that through the Son went out to the world and controlled it. Thus the Spirit from the very beginning with the creation of the world acted as the Spirit of the Son. Here also we note the subordination of the Spirit to the Son in connection with the creation, as we addressed this in a previous section. Only that awareness keeps us from not feeling at home in the world when we praise the Spirit of Christ as the Spirit Who delivers us. After all, also His involvement in the creation and preservation of the world is the work of the Spirit of the Son and thus now of the Spirit of Christ.

With this confession that the Spirit always is the Spirit of Christ for us, something else is related as well. If the Spirit always is the Spirit of Christ, then He is always also the Spirit of the Word. With "Word" in this connection we do not mean the eternal Word, the Son of God, but the Word that goes out from God to the world, in the creation and preservation of the world as well as in the revelation as we now have that in the Scriptures. God has created the world by speaking, that is by His Word, even as He now preserves it by His Word, and He speaks also by the Word of His covenant and of His fellowship in the world. That Word has power through the Spirit; it creates and preserves the world, it produces, maintains, and also restores the fellowship through the Spirit.

Word and Spirit are very closely associated with each other. When Scripture says that *by the Word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth* (Ps.33:6), we must not interpret this in any other way than what it says. We must not suggest it to say that *the Word of the LORD* indicates the second Person, and *the breath [or Spirit] of His mouth* the third Person, as if we were to find in this text a Scriptural proof of the Trinity. The parallelism of this verse means that we should think of the same thing with the Word of the LORD and the breath or Spirit of His mouth. In these words is presented the power that is contained in the Word of God. The illumination that we have from the New Testament enables us to understand that the power of the Word of God is the Spirit. That Word goes out from the Father through the Son. In that measure there is in Psalm 33: 6 a pointing to the Trinity.

Thus everything that God does to and in the world (the creation, the preservation, the establishment of the fellowship between Him and man, as well as the redemption) takes place through the Word. But that then the Word specifically is the Word of the Son of His love, we will in the relationship of God to the world never be able to understand the Spirit apart from that Word. Everything that God does, He does through His Word, and the power of that Word is then the Spirit. Apart from and without that Word the Spirit does not work.

It has particular significance that God works through His Word and that the Spirit is always the Spirit of the Word. When God creates and preserves by His Word, it means that all creatures are His servants in the sense that not only are they subject to Him, but that also all function according to their own nature. With His preservation God does rule completely over all things, but with this He uses the powers that He once created. By the Word of God the creatures are held in that twofold relationship to God.

When we pay attention to the lives of people in relationship to God we need to take note of the same thing. We speak of a direct work of God in the hearts of men, that is, an immediate rebirth. With this we mean a change of the heart as Scripture reports took place with Lydia, of whom it is said that *the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message* (Acts 16:14). It is certainly improper to limit regeneration to that opening of the heart; yet it is part of regeneration. We refer to this as the immediate work of the Spirit and intend with it that it does not happen through the revealed Word of God, for it takes place through the recreating Word of Him *Who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were* (Rom.4:17).

It is very difficult to understand what that change of heart is exactly. We are however able to say that the heart then becomes controlled by the sanctifying Spirit, but in such a way that the heart again begins to express itself according to its own design. Obviously, through sin not only is one's relationship disrupted and the bond of communion with God broken, but as a result of that disturbed relationship the natural disposition of the heart is also altered somewhat. And it is this that the recreating Word of God must again set right. That change for the good does not happen through the revealed Word of God, and yet not without connection with that Word. The action of the Spirit accompanies the outworking of the Word; and that change takes place so that we would be able to receive the Word. It is therefore the opening of the heart for the Word and has as its purpose obedience to the Word.

Thus when through the working of the Spirit the heart again begins to express itself in keeping with its original orientation, the hearing of the Word is then truly achieved. The additional influence by the Spirit takes place through the Word of revelation. We are accustomed to distinguish the renewing work of the Spirit in this way; yet we must be careful not to lose sight of the entirety of that work, that which we call being born again or regeneration. When we keep that totality in mind we are able to speak of being born again by the revealed Word of God in the way Scripture does: *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the Word that was preached to you* (1Pet.1:23-25).

It is in this way that for us the Spirit always is the Spirit of the Word. And one cannot deny that the Spirit by leading our lives and by means of the history of the world has a great deal to teach us. However, we can understand that instruction only through the light of the revealed Word of God. Moreover, the direction of our lives is led for a large part by God's revelation in His Word, since our ways are determined to a great degree by obedience to God's Word or by a resistance to it. Thus we may never separate the working of the Spirit with respect to our lives from the revealed Word of God. What the Spirit does for us is directing us through the Word. When Scripture says that *those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God* (Rom.8:14), it means a being led by the Spirit through the Word. With this therefore our responsibility is maintained from the beginning.

We need to let ourselves be guided by the Word of the Spirit. Also when we think of the so-called immediate work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we must be careful to realize that God gives His gifts in the way of a demand. Believers must be busy with respect to themselves and their children with the promise of God, submitting themselves to it and expecting its fulfillment. To everyone the command comes to hear the Word of God, and by means of hearing its demand the Holy Spirit changes our heart in such a way that it learns to understand God's Word and follow it.

Even as for us the Spirit is always the Spirit of the Word, that Word is for us always the Word of the Spirit. The Spirit does not only sometimes accompany the Word, does not only at times give that Word power, does not merely now and then make that Word effective, but always. However, the Word of God through the Spirit is often effective in hardening and closing the heart. Nevertheless the Word is always the Word of the Spirit, whether for redemption or for judgment. It is in this way that the Word in Scripture is called the sword of the Spirit by the apostle Paul: *Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God* (Eph.6:17).

When the Spirit is always the Spirit of the Word for us, it is impossible to play off the Spirit over against the Word and then with an appeal to the Spirit provide for oneself more freedom with respect to the Word. The activity of the Spirit will be evident in the continuation with the Word, which at the same time is a remaining in Christ from Whom the Word proceeds, and of Whom that Word testifies and Who by that Word, that is the Word of His Spirit, gives Himself to us.

### ***He is Also Given to Me***

The second part of the answer states this about the work of the Holy Spirit: *Second, He is also given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever.* With these words there are two questions that can be raised, namely whether some place should have been provided here for the widespread work the Holy Spirit does and will do in the whole world. And secondly, whether the work of the Spirit is not viewed here too individualistically.

As to the first question, we must not lose sight of the fact that the renewing work of the Spirit with respect to the entire world in the last days, appears in the concluding articles of the Apostles Creed about *the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.* And furthermore, with respect to the work of the Spirit in the world today, we must not forget that such work is concentrated in man, especially in the second Adam, in Christ the Head of the new humanity. There are those who through an improper understanding of the so-called common grace, disconnect the work of creation and that of recreation. They believe that there is an ongoing separate work of preservation of the world next to and not dependent on its deliverance. These people must feel that there is a considerable void here in the catechism, and may believe that there is a need to include a separate chapter about the work of the Spirit in the once created world.

However, this need does not exist for those who consider the entire work of the preservation of the world contingent on redemption, and thus in the first place then on the salvation of those in Christ. When we see Christ as the center of the now existing world there is no lacuna in the catechism. God has included the entire world that fell into sin through its first head Adam in its new Head Christ. Integrally it is included in deliverance, and therefore it still exists every day, and is being preserved each day. This redemption through Christ is first worked out in the believers, but will one day lead to the restoration and glorification of this whole world. Because of that redemption, which is prepared in the believers, unbelievers at this time share in many of the blessings, receive many gifts and talents, and are included in the drive

toward development that exists in the world due to the emancipating Spirit of Christ. Thus the Spirit's work in the whole world and in the unbelievers is not unrelated to what He does in the believers.

Therefore we cannot speak here of a lacuna in the catechism, even if additional consideration could be given to the concepts provided. The Spirit acted centrally in the redemption in Christ, in His conception and birth, in His anointing, and in all of His work. Connected with this is the fact that through the Spirit the Word of Christ, which is the revelation of grace, from the beginning went out for the redemption of the world. Moreover the Spirit works redemptively in believers, that is, in the entire church on earth.

And finally there is a result of what the Spirit does in the whole world, and also in unbelievers. We previously referred to Psalm 104: 30, *You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the earth*, and noted that when Scripture assigns the new blossoms in the spring to the Spirit it means the Spirit of Christ. What is fundamentally involved is whether we constantly see the fellowship between God and man, namely the love of God expressed in the eternal Word, as the dominant *motif* in all of creation. When we do, we see no gap here in the catechism, because that leading *motif* has been mentioned. The restoration of that fellowship must bring about the rescue of the whole world, and now already is its controlling factor.

With respect to the second question, whether the catechism does not address redemption too individualistically here, we need to admit the appearance of this. After all, apparently without further qualification the answer speaks of "me" and "I." Nevertheless, we immediately recognize it as appearance when we take note of what is actually said, namely, that the Spirit *make[s] me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever*, that is, He engrafts me into Christ. With that being incorporated into Christ, the restoration of the fellowship, the redemption in fellowship, is evident and individualism is overcome. Through that engrafting I and all believers constitute the body of Christ, the restored fellowship. The Spirit is therefore the Spirit of fellowship. He is the Spirit of fellowship in God, of communion between Father and Son; He is the Spirit of fellowship between God and man, and the Spirit of fellowship between people communally. He restores a fellowship of believers in Christ, and in connection with this there is still some interrelation in the whole present world. People have often attempted to defend individualism by appealing to the Holy Spirit; yet how poorly they have then understood the work of the Spirit!

That becomes even clearer when we examine more closely the words of the last part of the answer: *Second, He is also given to me*. How do I come to know that the Holy Spirit is also given to me? Could this be the way, that I examine within myself the workings of the Holy Spirit and from the results conclude that in fact He has been given to me and thus I am engrafted into Christ? That would be the experiential way in which I would seek to have certainty of my belonging to Christ. And this would surely be the proper order in reverse. I would proceed from the knowledge of the Holy Spirit to the knowledge of Christ.

However, if Christ is the second Person in God and the Holy Spirit is the third Person as was clear from the first part of this answer, then I must also come from the knowledge of Christ to that of the Holy Spirit. From this it is evident again that the revelation in Scripture of the Holy Trinity is not something abstract, but in every respect is related and connected to our lives. The way of coming to know the Holy Spirit comes from knowing Christ. Through faith we may receive and accept Christ, that is Christ as He is revealed to us in God's Word, namely as the Head of His church, as the One in Whom is the fullness of blessing for His own.

Therefore God's covenant is vitally important for this: every believer shares in the blessing that in Christ is bestowed on the whole church. This confession represents the genuine triumph over individualism. Through Scripture I may now understand that I have come to faith and to participation in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Therefore from my believing participation in Christ I may conclude that the Holy Spirit *is also given to me*. Once more we need to mention that the Spirit is given to the whole church, as that became especially clear through the revelation at Pentecost. And from that I may conclude that He is also given to me. Every believer possesses the Holy Spirit only in fellowship with all of God's people.

From all of this it is surely evident that the statement: *Second, He is also given to me* is an expression of faith and not something that is based on one's own determination. We follow the Scriptures by faith, even as the result of that faith in Scripture is that we begin to observe the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit in our life. We cannot emphasize

enough that it is only through faith through which we surrender ourselves to Christ, that we have the ability to discern the work and guidance of the Spirit. Without that faith we would consider our own excitement and emotions as the action of the Spirit.

We need to observe here yet that we attain to the faith-knowledge of the Holy Spirit last of all. Undoubtedly, the initial knowledge of God contains the full knowledge of the Triune God as it were in embryonic form; and nothing strange or foreign is added externally to that first knowledge, for all progress in this constitutes growth and development. And yet we cannot deny that we attain to that distinct knowledge of the Holy Spirit and His work last. Also in our knowledge the order of the Persons is maintained. By faith we know Jesus Christ as the One given to us from the Father, and through that knowledge we come to that of the Holy Spirit as poured out for us by Christ. All of that knowledge however is faith-knowledge.

### ***Our Share in Christ***

It is said regularly and bears repeating from time to time, that we share in Christ by faith – in the first place Christ Himself, but then with Him also *all of His benefits*. Faith first of all reaches out to Christ, that is, true faith does this and always must be directed in the first place to Christ. There is a great deal of wrong searching in the church, and sometimes she is also led improperly in the preaching. There is in fact much searching for Christ's benefits in which Christ Himself does not occupy the central place. The primary motive with this is then the pursuit of one's own salvation, and sometimes that intensive concentration on our own salvation is fostered by the sermon. A constant and most emphatic warning about hell and damnation could enhance and encourage such an egocentric tendency.

Of course, we need to be warned about a destiny of perdition in a Scriptural way. And yet this needs to take place with all due care and discretion. Of course there is also a place for the words of John the Baptist who when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing said to them: *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath (Matt.3:7)?* If there was any serious intent with the Pharisees and Sadducees in coming to the baptism of John, it was only in trying to escape the coming judgment. They failed to hear the actual message of the voice in the wilderness, namely that the glory of the Lord would be revealed. The Holy Spirit may have awakened true faith in a church in principle; however, if encouraged by wrong preaching the thought of one's own salvation continues to dominate the minds of all, a certain darkness still lingers. Much vacillation and a lack of progress in faith may well be ascribed to this. For us it is all about Christ, and when that is placed in the foreground faith is strengthened by it and many believers experience progress.

It is impossible to share in the benefits of Christ without sharing in Him. The reality of His benefits is always His love in which He fully gave Himself. Justification is not a transfer of Christ's righteousness to our account without us having a personal bond with Christ. What made His suffering and death a sacrifice for our sins, except His love in which He offered Himself for our sakes in that suffering to God? Specifically through that love in His suffering He earned righteousness in our place. Whoever does not understand that love of Christ in His suffering can never see a substitutionary satisfaction in it, no matter how many times this has been taught him at catechism; and he also cannot in this way take part in that righteousness by faith. Faith can never just take hold of that righteousness, for it is aroused by that love of God in Christ, and is related to that love. There is therefore no justification without that relationship of faith with Christ Himself. And with respect to sanctification it hardly needs to be said that it does not exist without Christ living in our hearts by faith.

In His love Christ has this great augmentation, namely that He gives Himself to all His own. Through faith we share in Christ Himself when we by faith discover and receive His love. That does not suggest separating Christ from His benefits. Least of all should we advance the idea that a personal relationship with "Jesus" is possible even if one abandons the whole content of Scripture. We have already said that His love makes the vicarious nature of His sacrifice possible and that He lives in our hearts with His love. Faith that is a commitment to the Word of God immediately sees that Jesus is the Christ, understands the office of the Christ, and realizes this specifically because it sees His love. And even if there is not yet the doctrinal discernment of the confessions of the church, from the beginning faith sees Christ as the Sent One of the Father, as acting in our place, and as the result of this He gives Himself to us in love for our redemption.

We confess that we by a *true faith share in Christ*. Scrupulously therefore we must avoid all mysticism that dreams of a direct union with Christ without faith. Again, we must not deny the work of the Spirit in the opening of our hearts, but the love of Christ is received by faith that is formed through the revelation of that love in the Word of God. Faith is always daring to live with the Word of God whatever evidence in our own heart or in the world may arise against it. God's love in Christ of which the Word of God speaks to us opposes all those assertions and transcends this as truly divine. In faith there is always first the adoration or worship, the consecration of God's love in Christ, and its exclusivity. God's testimony is absolute, specifically because it is divine and opposes every false witness of the world. With the veneration of this love however is connected its acceptance and appropriation, because faith understands how that love of Christ reaches out to all and desires a place in our hearts and lives. And this is an acceptance by faith that understands the desire and intent of that love. It is in this way then that we *by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits*.

It is the Holy Spirit Who makes us *share in Christ and all His benefits*. It is evident once more that the Spirit is the Spirit of the Word. It is He after all Who makes *me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits*; and faith is generated and addressed by the Word. Through the Word the Spirit of Christ comes to us, and God's love in Christ is revealed and given to us in the way of faith. Then the Word is not a dead letter for us, or a law that we must obey in our own strength, but it is the living Word of God that makes us alive and enables us to see the things that God has given us, and centrally His love in Christ. This therefore applies: *the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life* (2Cor.3:6). And now we understand the other words of the same chapter: *Now the Lord is the Spirit* (2Cor.3:17), that is, God's love in Christ is communicated to us by faith through the Spirit of the Word or through the Word of the Spirit.

Consistent with and related to making us share in Christ and all His benefits, we read: *to comfort me, and to remain with me forever*, meaning here that the Holy Spirit comforts us. Belonging to the benefits that we receive in fellowship with Christ is the comfort of the Spirit. It is in this way that He is the Comforter. Thus it is immediately clear that the Spirit comforts us with Christ, that is, with the fullness of God's love in Christ. The Spirit in Himself has nothing for us, and all that He can give us is in Christ, Who Himself said: *He will bring glory to Me by taking from what is Mine and making it known to you* (John 16:14).

When the Spirit comforts us with Christ, He also needs to show us who Christ is for us – in other words, He also must convict us of our sins. It is not necessary to say that He must first convict us of our sins. Such persuasion comes particularly through the revelation of God's atoning and conquering love in Christ. Summarizing matters, we may say that Spirit reveals God to us in what He wishes to be for us, as we have repulsed Him, and as He now wants to gather us for Himself by the atonement for and the victory over our sins. In the revelation of Christ by the Spirit of the Word there is always such a great shame, the humiliation that brings us to a realization of guilt.

Because of the close relationship of the words *to comfort me* with what precedes, we are entitled to associate the words *by true faith* also with *to comfort me*. The Holy Spirit comforts us in the way of a true faith regarding the Word of God. We are constantly convicted of our sins and of their forgiveness through God's Word and our faith with respect to it. And thus in our entire journey through life we are convinced of the guidance of God's hand. The comforting by the Holy Spirit in adversity and sorrow happens then in such a way that He first persuades us of God's justice. By the revelation of His Word He makes us humble ourselves before God's majesty as the glory of Him Who alone must determine our lives and that He does so for His own sake.

There is no comfort outside of that acknowledgement. And whatever outside of it we might wish to look for in certain emotional experiences in which we do not yield ourselves to God, but instead seek to maintain ourselves at the center of the relationship between God and us, is a sham of comfort and not a reality. However, when we have acknowledged God in His justice, He makes us believe through the Word how God shares in our sorrow and how in His love He helps us to bear it. This also belongs to the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and also is a being comforted with Christ since God has come into our lives in Him. Moreover, the Holy Spirit makes us submit to God also through Christ Who has submitted to the justice of God's love, having been obedient to death on the cross. For us in the relationship to God there is nothing to learn and nothing to receive outside of Christ.

That the Spirit comforts us through the Word and does so in the way of faith does not take away the fact that the Spirit is first in this activity, and that He continues in it successfully. Our responsibility is included in the demand of faith, yet it

all proceeds from the Spirit. If anything were still to be expected of us as we are in ourselves, there would be no comfort for us. We would have turned away from God in fear long ago, or in rebellion turned against Him, if the Holy Spirit had not continued to vanquish as the Comforter. Without that Comforter no flesh cannot truly live, for then it turns itself away from God or turns against Him. Yet we rejoice that there is the victorious action of the Spirit through which He reaches the hearts of many. There are always those who meet God through the Spirit – and dare to and want to meet Him. In every one of the believers the Spirit carries out His work and prevails.

In addition to this, we note that what the confession states in conclusion: *and to remain with me forever*, may also because of the close connection with the words *by true faith* be considered interrelated. Here also we see a certain reciprocity, even if here also the Spirit is first. In keeping with His faithfulness the Spirit will remain with us forever, but also by faith we hold on to the indwelling of the Spirit. It is in this way that the certainty of salvation, the certainty of eternal blessedness is a matter of faith.

This certainty is not the result of a mere intellectual conclusion that we might draw from particular statements of Scripture. For all that we know to be true from the Scriptures, so that we build our life on it, we know by faith. By faith we know the Spirit in the constancy of His love as He lives in us, and thus we know that He will never leave us, no matter how often we might want to banish Him. Even after this life the mutuality of the relationship of the Spirit and us will remain. The Spirit continues to fill the body of Christ for ever, but we also by our faith hold on to the Spirit unendingly.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 21****54. What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Christian church?**

*I believe that the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church chosen to everlasting life. And I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it.*

**55. What do you understand by the communion of saints?**

*First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts. Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.*

**56. What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins?**

*I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, nor my sinful nature, against which I have to struggle all my life, but will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never come into condemnation.*

***The Work of the Triune God in the Church***

In this Lord's Day we continue the confession of God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. In this work of sanctification mention is made of the gathering of the Christian church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins. Those three constitute a component of the work of the Holy Spirit that we can only consider in connection with the whole, for we are not able to take one element out of the whole and isolate it. This would fragment God's work. Connected to the work of the Spirit considered in this Lord's Day is yet the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. It is true that the division is such that we confess here what the Holy Spirit does in the present time, while what He does at the end of this time and thereafter, is reserved for the next Lord's Day.

Nevertheless, there is the closest relationship between this twofold work of the Spirit. We should not think that in what He does now, He merely keeps matters functioning for the present time, while the true work of redemption really begins with the return of Christ. For the reality is that He already now is busy with the sanctification of the world. After all, with sanctification we understand the consecration, the dedication of all that is created to God. Now that the world is corrupted by sin, that dedication of all creation also involves purification from sin and its consequences. Of course this concerns especially the human race, but in connection with this it also entails all creation.

Belonging to that sanctification is also the submission of all the other creatures to man as their head, and thus we can properly speak of the universal work of sanctification. This cannot be limited to a part of creation, or to a specific, distinct sphere in it. God restores the world that He has created in all its relations and associations. He is busy now with that great work of sanctification, and what He does at this time is to prepare for the apocalypse of the last day so that it necessarily must come as the result of the work He performs now. God's eternal work of purification takes place in this time. The principles for the reality that is to come are now being worked out in the gathering of the church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sin. Taking all this together constitutes the restoration of life. The Holy Spirit does not add something new to creation with His work of sanctification, but He restores and sanctifies it again to His original fellowship and situation.

When with the Apostles Creed we confess the truth of God with respect to the church, we can never see her in isolation. For the formation of the church is part of the confession of faith that begins with God the Holy Spirit, and concludes with eternal life in which God will be all in all. In that universal work of the Spirit the gathering of the church on earth is one component.

This speaks even more to us when we view the work of sanctification not only as that of the Holy Spirit, but of the Triune God. This sanctification is possible only through the victorious love of the Son; and it means a sanctification of the world that went forth from God the Father. The Holy Spirit makes all things go out to God, because they are from God as Father and through God as Son. The sanctification of all that is created will also bring the glorification of the Triune God.

The gathering of the church is first in this work of sanctification by the Spirit, and she is gathered as *the communion of saints*, which exults in *the forgiveness of sins*. What is confessed here is that the Son of God gathers for Himself the church. In other words, the confession does not proceed from the Holy Spirit but from the Son and His work. Yet, this must not be considered a mistake on the part of the catechism. For what is decisive for us in our perspective of the confession is what we discern and distinguish about the Trinity and the proper work of each of the Persons. And thus we need to understand what we confess about the Holy Spirit.

Concerning Christ we believe that He has ascended into heaven. In that ascension He entered the immeasurable space of heaven created by the love of God. At that time all limitations with respect to Him sharing in God's love through the Spirit were removed. Moreover, He then also received without measure the freedom with respect to the Holy Spirit to confer Him upon the children of men, so that He by means of the Spirit would live in the hearts of many and thus on earth as well He would provide living space for Himself. Then I grasp the work of the gathering the church. That means that Christ begins to live in many and they form a unity in Him, Who in them provides living space for Himself on earth. He does this through the Holy Spirit Whom He sends, and Who for us is the Spirit of Christ and Whom we do not know in any other way than the Spirit of Christ. I know nothing of the Holy Spirit outside of Jesus Christ, but I know Him as the Spirit of Christ through Whom Christ lives in us and Who fills us with the fullness of Christ.

Then one sees the work of the restoration by the Holy Spirit Who is the Spirit of Christ, Who atones and redeems. In the gathering of the church, the restoration of mankind as a community in fellowship with the Triune God – with God the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit – has begun.

In this connection we need to say something now already of what is of the greatest significance for the confession of the church. In science the proposition that the whole is more than the sum of the parts is not unknown. A tree is more than the roots, the trunk, and the branches together. Thus also the church is more than the total number of believers. To be sure, we are able to see the unity of the church as well as her activity in it. But it is an improper view that we must proceed from the idea of believers and thus come to the church. Therefore we must not reason that first we are born again and become believers, and then we are incorporated into Christ and His church. For then we do not properly envision the church.

In the catechism the church is described first and then we confess: *And I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it*. The miracle in this world splintered by sin is that after the fall in Adam the unity has been restored in Christ. When Christ is present the unity exists and the church is a reality: the new humanity. And we must all as shoots grow out of that trunk. The work of the Spirit is that He anchors us in Christ, engrafting us in Him, and thus we are born again and become members. It is an unscriptural idea when people say that nothing stands between God and me. For between God and me is Christ, the Head of the fellowship. Once no one would have had fellowship with God apart from Adam. Now also no one belongs to God except in Christ. Paul refers to this restored fellowship as a great mystery: *In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets* (Eph.3:4,5). When we forget this, the miracle is gone and we are on our own again. Now however we may know that our life is the life of the church, and that the heart of the church beats in our hearts. That is the work of the Spirit.

This work of restoration by the Spirit of Christ also impacts all humanity now living. That mankind is still mankind, and the world is still the world is true because in it like a nucleus, the church which is the communion of the elect in whom Christ lives, is being gathered. All those people living on earth have to deal in their unity and fellowship with Christ, even though they reject Him. In Christ through His Holy Spirit the restoration of the whole humanity is achieved, and to this end also His Spirit proceeds; by His Spirit He seeks to live in all and everyone, and for this purpose He also said: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me* (Matt.28:18). Therefore woe to those who in one way or another benefit from the influence and blessing of Christ, but shut Him out!

We confess therefore that the church is not an island in the world; in fact, she is the genuinely authentic heart of mankind, the basis of why humanity exists. Therefore we confess here *that the Son of God...gathers...for Himself...a church chosen to everlasting life*. By His Spirit Christ lives in His own people, and provides for Himself living space in their hearts. It is for that reason that we read here that the Son of God gathers that church *for Himself*. For what is involved in the gathering of the church is the glorification of Christ and of the fullness that is in Him.

We delight in the comfort contained in this: Christ wants to live in us! Naturally, that He *gathers for Himself* also means that because He lives in us, Christ completely takes possession of us for Himself. After all, whose is the church and all that is in her, her life and love, the fellowship and joy, belonging together with its sorrows, the praise and the honor, the gifts and the powers, the gold and the silver, the prayers and the sighs? The church and all that is within her does not belong to the pope, or to the state; not to one or another theology, not to an ideal, and not to office-bearers – in fact, the church belongs to Christ because she is His. She belongs to Him because He bought her with His blood and lives in her with His Spirit; and moreover He devoted and dedicated her to Himself and in Himself to the Triune God. None of us has any say over the church, and no single pattern of thought will control her; only the fullness of the Spirit of Christ can do that.

Christ provides a place for Himself in the church. That does not mean that the church is so negative as to delimit a space for Christ. That church in which He lives is valuable and precious precisely because He wants to live in her, for she consists of those chosen to everlasting life. Those are people who are very precious, God's pearls and diamonds; not because of what they are in themselves, but they are precious to God because they are being changed by the indwelling of Christ. They are *chosen to everlasting life*. And this is not the life that begins only after death, but it is the fruitful and productive life in communion with God in Christ in which the restoration has begun, that is, the Spirit's work of sanctification in time. In carrying out election by the indwelling of Christ the restoration of mankind is a reality.

It is in this way that we confess the work of the Triune God in the church.

### ***Static or Dynamic?***

Now we need to consider how we conceive of the church. Do we think of her as the preacher of the Word of God to the whole world, and thus as one channel in the universally redeeming work of the Holy Spirit, or do we see her as the new humanity in which the redeeming work of the Spirit reveals a provisional result? Both views are found in our midst. The only thing in question is the starting-point when the confession of the church is discussed. Naturally in this case one does not speak of contrasting opposites, even though a difference in starting-point has far reaching consequences. Those consequences however become disastrous when a person obstinately clings to one starting-point while rejecting the other as wrong.

This difference in the view of the church can also be designated as the difference between a dynamic consideration and a static one. When one considers the church as the provisional result of the sanctifying work of the Spirit, one views her as a body in which something was established for the time being. That is a static understanding which gives peace to our believing minds. Then there is a certain comfort and assurance in belonging to the church, and a person believes that he is included in the sanctifying work of the Spirit. However, immediately in this static view there is the danger that such peace is not the peace of faith in which there is always a certain tension at hand, but that it degenerates into a self-assured and self-satisfied peacefulness. With the dynamic perspective practiced one-sidedly one likely considers the church as separated from the world, having only the calling to proclaim the gospel to the unbelieving world. But missing probably is the broad concept wherein they see believers active as the new humanity in every sphere in the Name of Christ.

What is at issue here is the question of the distinction between the Church as organism and the church as institute. Among Christians there is some objection to the designation of the Church as organism. When the church is considered in this way, they propose instead the idea of 'institute' because the word "church" makes one immediately think of organization and institution. After all, "Church" means: what is the Lord's, or the house of the Lord. From this point of view it is certainly acceptable to limit the word "church" to the church as institute. If only the difference involved a name there would be no difficulties, and there would be no objection in replacing the designation "the Church as organism" with 'the people of God.'

However, as noted above, at issue here is a difference in the starting-point. Once more we need to say that the one starting-point does not exclude the other. With the static view one can never place enough emphasis on the fact that the result of the redeeming work of the Spirit as that is given in the Church is only a provisional result, and that the Church continues to be gathered by God through the means of the preaching of the church, and thus the call for the church's mission work remains. With the dynamic perspective one must not lose sight of the fact that there is nevertheless a Church, and that not only we by faith find a certain rest and peace in this, but that also God according to the prophecy rests in this.

Even if one were to reject the term "the Church as organism," the distinction that forms its basis must not be abandoned. For this distinction enables us to see very sharply the restriction of the church's calling as institute – a calling clearly delimited from the calling that we as Christians have in all other areas of life. The church as institute has received the power of the keys of the kingdom, that is, the authority to apply the Word of God and to exercise discipline because of the sins in her midst. With this the church can and must also give public testimony concerning the sins in general, also against the sins of the government and against sins in other areas of life. However, the church does not have the calling for the regulation of life in all the other social relationships such as the state, the society, the school, and the family.

If one loses sight of the distinction between the church as institute and the believers as they function in all other areas of life, one might well be inclined to expand the task of the church as institute outside its proper boundaries. With respect to the limitation of the church's calling, Scripture is clear enough. We read in the gospels: *Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or an arbiter between you?"* (Luke 12: 13,14). We also take note that when Paul sends the runaway converted slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon, the apostle does not deal with the subject of slavery. He writes: *I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him-- who is my very heart-- back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced* (Phil.10-14). In this we should not forget that the abolition of slavery was a result of the far-reaching impact of the gospel. And thus we take note of the blessing that comes to all of life through the proclamation of the church.

The question is whether Scripture when it speaks of the church denotes only the church as institute. In answering that question one could conceive that the intent is to ask whether Scripture itself posits another designation for "the Church as organism." It is in the same way the question must be answered whether with this answer of the catechism we must think only of the church as institute.

That Scripture in the first place has in mind the church as institute is beyond doubt. And for her organization and life Scripture provides a complete constitution. In connection with that organization it can be said of Christ that He is the very principle out of which the entire Church develops. Thus Paul writes to the Ephesians: *And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be Head over everything for the church* (Eph.1:22). We must not forget however that in the same letter to the Ephesians as well as to the Colossians the apostle has written about the great mystery in this way: *And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment -- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one Head, even Christ* (Eph.1:9,10). Thus the revealed mystery is that God in Christ gathers and restores the Jews and Gentiles into one body. We read here then the disclosure of the universal result of God's works. Moreover, we read that *you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth* (1Tim.3:15). Obviously Scripture points to the church as institute here.

In the book of Revelation we read: *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband* (Rev.21:2). It would be impossible to think of that new Jerusalem as the church, and only consider her as the church institute. Much rather what is meant with the city of God is the fellowship of the believers in their complete life's experience as it will be restored once in glory. And in connection with the last two Scripture passages mentioned, there is much to be said for speaking of the church as the house of God; and when referring to the believers in their numerous experiences in life, to speak of the city of God.

It is remarkable that in 1 Timothy 3: 15 the designations *God's household* and *the pillar and foundation of the truth* are used next to each other. The static perspective almost automatically belongs with *God's household*, while the dynamic point of view links readily with *the pillar and foundation of the truth*. These two concepts belong together; the church cannot be the bearer of the truth if she is not God's house or household. In the above therefore the distinction between the Church as organism and the church as institute has not been placed on a par with the difference between the static and the dynamic considerations. When the point of origin is the Church as organism, a person likely follows the static viewpoint; and when one goes out from the church as institute, the dynamic perception probably is employed.

We do not need to doubt that in this answer of the catechism the church as institute is intended. Therefore also primarily the dynamic line is followed: the Son of God is still busy gathering the church and she continues to be born. Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact how with some emphasis it is said that the Son of God gathers a church *for Himself*. God gathers a church for Himself in order that He might dwell in her, so that she would be His house. Herein we have then the idea of rest, the static concept. And as soon as the church is conceived of as a given, the idea of the lordship of the believers over all creation, their use of the earth and its fullness is directly connected to this. And once more we envision the city of God.

### ***The Gathering of the Son of God***

It is a confession of faith when we say that the Son of God gathers the church. And in this confession we do not consider her at all as the work of men or as the result of earthly factors, even though the Son of God is able and does make use of the work of humans and of earthly factors. Only by faith there is then in the reflection of the church the respect of veneration – an amazement that does not recede when the sins of the church are seen, but rather increases. The church is more than that gathering of people; in her there is a continuing evidence of the victorious power of divine grace. And that can only be seen by faith. We continue to love the church in spite of her sins; for this love is then a love for God's sake which overcomes all opposition.

We may experience some surprise that at this point mention is made especially of the Son of God, for the confession of the church is after all found in the third section of the Apostles Creed where we make confession of the Holy Spirit and His work. And thus we could expect that this answer would go out from and focus on the Holy Spirit. It is also the question of whether that would not have been more reasonable. However, when that has not happened it must find its rationale in the fact that the catechism seeks to convey the gathering of the church as the work of the Redeemer, of the Restorer of the fellowship with God. Moreover in this way the sovereignty of Christ in His church may be more readily displayed, and thus all the autonomy of mysticism and spiritualism prevented. That happens also in referring to the Word of God as the means by which the church is gathered. Besides, the Spirit is in fact mentioned in this answer. Also, that the gathering of the church takes place according to the will of the Father may be observed in the fact that the confession refers back to the election. It is in this way that the Name of the Triune God is glorified in the gathering of the church.

It is clear that the gathering of the church takes place mainly by means of the church herself through the preaching of God's Word, especially in the official worship services. The church should make certain that in those services the work of the Son of God is not lost sight of and no arbitrary practices surface, for the service of the office could also seek to put itself in the place of the Son of God. In this way not only is human autonomy introduced into the church, but thereby she also quickly becomes secularized. The service of the office-bearers always take place in faith, that is, it is always dependent on the Spirit of Christ, and thus also is accepted by those for whom it is performed. Without having a relationship of faith with Christ, the whole official service has no purpose. Every time again the miracle must be accomplished in it.

Thus in the administration of the Word the relationship with Christ must be experienced. Without this a beautiful sermon, or good exegesis, or a scholarly sermon, or a moving sermon, or a psychologically interesting sermon, may “satisfy” us, but it is not a faithful involvement with the Word of God and therefore no building up in the faith. Often matters are not truth-related in the church. It is difficult to stand in the truth and frequently we fail in this. Because the truth may only be received by a simple faith, and this is difficult to maintain, we are in most instances occupied with one substitute or another. At times we get the impression that in normal circumstances it is impossible to experience true communion and fellowship with God by faith every time during the service of the Word.

However, to say this would be a matter of unbelief, and not proceed from the fact that the Son of God gathers His church also through the ministry of the Word. And for the preservation of the truth in the proclamation of the church the work of Christ is our guarantee, even if this must be expected in faith. With all of this it is not suggested that we must fix our attention on the fact that the Word may grip us now and then, and that we must look forward to see if in it perhaps there is yet a token or so for us too. The service of the Word is not a game of chance. On the one hand there is the promise: *...so is My word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it* (Isa.55:11). It is a promise that does bring comfort, but it also contains the threat that when the Word is not received in faith, it is a judgment for us. On the other hand there is then also the calling always to receive it in faith. We can never listen enough to the claim of that calling, for what is pertinent here is that God gives things by way of His demand. Through faith, but then only in that way, the entire service will be alive for us.

The work of oversight and governing must also of service in the gathering of the church. As soon as the oversight of the consistory or of other assemblies degenerates into a worldly administration, the wonder of the church is lost. The regular home visiting is not just an examination, not an authoritarian imposition, nor an opportunity to exchange some subjective ideas and experiences, but a means for the edification of the church. To protect this truly spiritual ingredient in all of this is not a matter of living with apprehension and stress, but with a simple faith that begins every time with God and with His work.

The diaconal care for the needy is something other than an organization for philanthropy; it is also and equally a ministry and service of the Word, a demonstration and confirmation of the Word of the merciful High Priest, and it also serves for the building up of the church. It is evidence of the mercy of Christ for spiritual preservation. Therefore such loving gifts may not be withheld from the marginally involved member, for the full compassion of Christ needs to be granted to such a member as well in order that should the church at some time have to proceed to excommunication, that action would serve all the more to his shame.

Seen in this way the church is still being gathered and in the state of being born. And we are able to observe only a very small segment. We think for example of the triumphant church in heaven, and of the still enshrouded church in the future. Moreover, only a very small sector of the present church on earth is within our purview. When we understand that, we are kept from all self-satisfaction and from resting on what has been achieved. Scripture records this beautiful prayer: *And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (Eph.3:17-19). Realizing then that only with all the saints, that is, with all the believers of all the ages are we able to understand the knowledge of God, it teaches us always to be humble and modest.

Out of this attitude comes a consideration of the past as well as a reckoning with the fact that perhaps there will yet be a great development in the future. On the one hand there is in the church a strong emphasis on tradition respecting the fruit of the faith of past centuries. That should preserve us from revolutionary tendencies when some with determination seek to demolish all that has been built in the past. On the other hand, the realization that perhaps the church has times ahead of her when she understands that perfection has not yet been attained, and such awareness opens us for all that in God's revelation may yet be discovered as new. The church always needs to be inclined toward reformation, even to the acceptance of considering new possibilities each time. What a modesty and discretion the confession that the church is being gathered *from the beginning of the world to its end* should bring us! Also in this respect we often live a life not reflecting our own confession.

Nevertheless the church continues her existence on earth also at present. She continues to be formed and yet already exists. It is possible to combine those two thoughts because we do not see the church on her own, but confess that the fullness of her life is given to her in Christ. She is complete in Him, and yet in history she continually is born out of Him. For that reason the confession not only speaks of the church being gathered, but also of a being defended and preserved. *The Son of God defends and preserves* also what is now on earth coming to realization as the church.

That this does not happen mechanically and yet through means, namely *by His Spirit and Word* and thus also in the way of faith, hardly needs to be mentioned. We realize that there is an element in that revelation of defending and preserving that gives us a certain peace. By faith we take hold of God's Word not only in the revelation of what God wishes to be for us today, but also in its revelation of what He has done, that is, what He has done in the gathering of the church and having led us to be the church. Belonging to the church therefore gives us also great peace, for we know then that we are included in the defending and preserving action of the Son of God. However, such peace and rest must not be in the fact of belonging as such, but in finding peace through faith in the deed of God, Who caused us to be the church and still continually *defends and preserves* us spiritually in her fellowship!

That the church continues to be gathered and that she must be subservient to the Son of God in this will always be our calling on this world. And thus the church has the task of proclaiming the gospel to all creatures. The great speed of the work of the Lord will always keep us in a state of apprehension. While we may be thankful for all that is being done in this respect, yet the effort to spread the gospel on the mission field as well as in our own community calls for our devoted involvement.

### ***Chosen to Everlasting Life***

When Paul speaks about the church in his letter to the Ephesians, he begins with focusing on election. The foundation of the church is found in election, and thus we confess in this answer that *that the Son of God....gathers...a church chosen to everlasting life*. The confession of being *chosen to everlasting life* clearly highlights the static element. There is also however, as we expect to work out shortly, a being chosen to a calling.

In Ephesians 1 the apostle Paul speaks of being chosen in Christ. This doctrine has not been taught in the church as it deserves, with the result that there have been numerous unfruitful contemplations about election. Some even consider election a sort of fate, while others improperly pursue the question of whether they really belong to the elect. And thus for some election became no more than a lottery.

When we are chosen in Christ, we must also find our election in Him. First of all there is for us the immeasurable love of God revealed in Christ. From that love the call to faith goes out to us. When it creates faith in us we will see election in that call, and for us it becomes an incomprehensible and confounding miracle that we are called to that love in Christ. Through the fact that God calls us and that such a call encompasses us, we come to the realization that God has chosen us. That means our election today and every day. And thus in this we discover that we are eternally chosen in Christ, and from the very beginning were considered and reckoned in Him. It is in this way that we do not become entangled in idle speculations but our searching is constantly concentrated in Christ. We are therefore able to reject with the Canons of Dort a curious prying into the hidden mysteries and depths of God, and this could be called the first unailing fruit of a true faith in Christ, a fruit out of which election is known.

Along with this we should not overlook the significance of belonging to the church in terms of the awareness of our election. In this answer reference is made to ***a church chosen to everlasting life***. The consciousness of belonging to a church that is elect strengthens us in our own election. That must certainly not mean that it should be an automatic assumption for everyone. From that however we are preserved when we see that church constantly as the church chosen in Christ. And that needs to be foremost in our consciousness for then it becomes a discovery for our awareness in faith that there is a church chosen by God, and that we may belong to her. Thus we reach and come to our own election by means of that of the church. When we see in the church those who are hypocrites with respect to their faith, our own faith is not shaken for we realize that the election of the church is seen only by faith – by a faith that at the same time includes our own election. What will happen is that the discovery that there are also counterfeit believers will motivate us to live out of our own calling and election.

Election is an election *out of the whole human race*. That means therefore a particular and specific separation. But also this truth may be considered from two sides; for on the one hand the chosen church is separated from the whole human race, but on the other hand the human race is actually preserved in her for she forms the true new humanity. Thus it is better to speak of a separation of the unbelievers. Scripture states this in several places: *The righteous will never be uprooted, but the wicked will not remain in the land* (Prov.10:30), and, *you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not* (Mal.3:18), to mention a few.

Humanity is saved in the church, and also those two sides of the truth have their own significance. When we go out from the fact that the church is the fellowship of the elect, and that therefore there is a separation from the whole human race, it means that this should become evident in her gatherings. She cannot be populist church, a national church for all. A church that wishes to do that invalidates and annuls her election. It is for that reason that the church needs the exercise of discipline. To be sure, there will always be chaff among the wheat, but when considered externally no one who does not have the mark of election obvious and unmistakable in confession and life may be tolerated within her. The church is His house and therefore also is marked with the sign of His election. That is neither a bureaucracy nor a system of human regulations. And it is not a democracy either, but it is the humility of worshipping the electing God in His church.

Nevertheless there exists in the fellowship of the elect and the separation of the unbelievers a powerful calling. After all, we were chosen in God's good pleasure and for the purpose to be servants to all! What a responsibility there is then in being chosen by God! Inherent in her election is the church's calling in the world. A silent church is no church, and neither is a dominating church. Born out of the Word of the electing God, carried along in her history by the victory of that Word, the church is a prophetess. Whatever may disturb her, she is called to remain faithful in it. For then in her calling she proclaims the truth that liberates life. For in her being chosen she is called to the victory over the sectarianism of unbelief.

### ***The Characteristics of the Church***

We *believe a holy catholic Christian church*. When we confess this we think of the church as organism. With that of course we do not deny that with these words we also are mindful of the church as institute. In fact they have the greatest significance for the church as institute. However it would not come up in our minds to apply these characteristics to the institute of the church in the way the Roman Catholic Church does. Those who follow the Reformed confessions are often accused that in this they are almost the same as the church of Rome; but we reject that. Yet we do maintain that the characteristics of the church as organism or as the body of Christ are very important for her as institute. There is after all a very close relationship between the body of Christ and the church institute. The question is really: in how far and in what manner does the importance of these characteristics or attributes also apply to the church institute?

The church as the body of Christ or as organism with her own characteristics is the object of faith. We must be careful here not to view the relationship between faith and its contents improperly. The reality is not that faith is present and that we need to fill it with all kinds of content. Faith is dependent on its own subject matter, and is generated by its own contents. Therefore it is not true that for the strength of our faith it makes no difference whether we consider the church or not. When we understand the church our faith is enriched. The effectiveness of our faith grows through its content, if at least this faith is true faith, that is, if in all it receives and holds on to and thus also in His church, it sees God. When faith does not consider its possessions and thus also does not see the church as a treasure in God, it all comes down to being the 'Mammon.' In addition to this is the fact that Christ is seen as the Head of the body only by faith. With faith in Christ, faith with respect to His church is immediately a reality. Most certainly we need to distinguish between believing in God and believing with respect to His church. But we also believe through the church, namely in the church we see Him and thus believe in God. In the church He reveals Himself even more fully to us.

The church with her characteristics is thus the object of faith. Now faith understands that those attributes are given to the church with Christ as her Head and are conferred upon her by Him. The church is one, holy, universal, and Christian, insofar Christ by faith lives in those who are His. In spite of all of her imperfections faith recognizes her perfection in principle. Therefore we reject not only the yielding of the church as body of Christ to the institute, which is then declared as being one, holy, catholic, and Christian, as this is done by Rome. But we also find no rest for our faith in the purely

eschatological idea that today is understood by many, as if the church with her own characteristics belongs to that other world, the world of faith, which irreconcilably contrasts with this present world.

When we focus our attention on these attributes of the church at this time, we need to plot our course constantly between two extremes. In the course of the church's history many have lapsed into one or the other side of one-sidedness. Each time therefore we need to seek the answer of Scripture for the questions that arise in this pursuit.

### *THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH*

We believe and confess this unity of the church, and yet we observe her terrible division. To what position should this confession of the church's unity lead us? Should we confess it in such a way that we will consider only one church as the manifestation of the body of Christ, and should we condemn everything that is different or opposed to that? Or shall we do this the other way around so that we consider all churches of equal value or at least with some minor variations, and have fellowship at various times and places with the brothers everywhere and thus attempt to express the unity of the church?

On the one hand there is the sin of the Roman Catholic Church which maintains the expression of the unity with force and represents the sin of all churchism that sees nothing but evil in other churches. On the other hand there is the sin of "churchlessness" which does not value nor comprehend the unity of the church and has no difficulty advocating pluriformity.

Does the spiritual unity of the church also demand and require the manifestation of that unity of the organized church, and therefore the division is the result of sin? Or is the unity of the organized church entirely unnecessary, and thus in her diversity of format she demonstrates an enriched church life all the better? Do the various organized churches face each other militantly, or is there an ideal to be attained in seeking each other in brotherly reconciliation?

We go out from the idea that the organization of the church is not arbitrary, but is determined by God's Word and related to the fact that Christ is not only her organic Head but is also King of His church. If that is true there cannot be various, dissimilar churches alongside of each other all having equal rights, but there can only be one church. Apart from the question of whether any church exists in which complete obedience is found, it must be agreed that all divisions exist as a consequence of sin, no matter on what side sin is found as the churches disagree with each other in confession and practice in a variety of respects. In such a scenario the truth in some respect could then be found with only one of them every time, for truth is not plural. Either that or a person would have adopted a completely subjective point of view with respect to the concept of truth.

When according to Scripture there can only be one church, we should truly strive for unity. And those who genuinely confess the unity of the church are not those who are at peace with pluriformity and consider the differences of little or no significance, even though they may say that they do. Such people in the ecclesiastical world have practically abandoned the confession of the unity of the church. When we agree that the revelation of the one church is the demand of Scripture, it involves also that in practice we retain the organization of the church.

Does that mean that one could ever expect to find complete obedience in any church on earth? To assert that is possible only when one has a Roman Catholic view point, believing that there is infallible leadership in the institutional life of the church. Such a concept is certainly missing in a Reformational view, and we confess that there is sin in every organized church. When we realize this it makes us hesitant to reject any church merely because there is sin evident in it. The unity of the church needs to be maintained as long as possible. Only when a church clearly neglects her calling, namely disregarding the Word of the Lord and the administration of the sacraments; and when protests against this have not availed, one may and must come to a departure.

Does this also mean that when we do not discern any evidence of the body of Christ in the disobedient church, we condemn it as a false church and consider that Christ cannot give any blessing there at all? As long as believers remain there and the Word of God is not totally darkened, there will still be the fellowship of the Spirit of Christ. The unfaithfulness of people never annuls the faithfulness of Christ. In fact, in other churches we observe a functioning of

Christ that causes us on occasion to be jealous and ashamed. And thus we confess that in such a church also there is yet the evidence of the body of Christ.

Thus what Christ in His grace and faithfulness does yet confer as a blessing here and there is not a rule of life for us. But what is our rule for life is His Word that calls for the living presence of the church and for an ecclesiastical establishment which is faithful to her calling. And working out the unity of the church consists therefore in this that we affirm this one church, and in sorrow observe her adopting a combative attitude toward another church that forsakes her calling, trusting that through this battle people wrestle for the verification of the unity of the church according to the Word of the Lord. Only those who gave up the battle and preach reconciliation, forsake the struggle for the unity. This unity can only be obtained in the contest for the truth.

### *THE HOLINESS OF THE CHURCH*

It is easy to confess the characteristics of the church in the abstract. The difficulties come when we inquire about the manifestation of those attributes and the significance of them in practice. Thus we confess the holiness of the church because she exists in Christ through the Spirit. But how does that holiness reveal itself?

The church of Rome views the holiness in the spirituality and in her achievements. For us that is unacceptable for Scripture teaches us that we must consider the church's holiness as the spiritual sanctity of her members. Immediately the question arises: does the holiness of the church essentially reside only in her Head Christ, Who sanctifies her from within, or has He also provided a method in discipline to enforce in a certain way holiness in her members?

Over against the idea of a state church is the concept of Labadism, a phenomenon of the 1600s and similar to German Pietism. On the one hand then there is the tendency to extend the borders of the church as far as possible, preferably to include the whole nation and effectively to negate discipline, in order that the holiness from within can take place as broadly as possible. But on the other hand the idea of Labadism has not died out yet either, according to which nobody should be allowed to join the fellowship of the church except the person has been examined and of whom they have the firm conviction that he has been made alive by the Spirit, and has been converted.

We need to reject the concept of the state church, for this abrogates the church as church. After all, what can and may the church be other than the gathering of believers? Scripture speaks very clearly to the members of the church as to the saints in Christ, and to those who are called to be saints. Without discipline the church cannot exist, for no one may ever be tolerated in her midst who in his walk and confession does not show himself to be a believer, lest the church's name would be disgraced in the world. Moreover, the power of God's Word is greatly weakened by a state church, and it is that Word which comes to His people who live in His covenant. And when the gathering of the state church can no longer be considered as such, then the service of the Word can never be effective there either.

But just as certainly we need to reject the idea of Labadism. For who is able to judge the thoughts of the heart except God alone? And how can we humans ever discern with certainty whether a person is a living member of the body of Christ or not? Moreover, a person could already for a long time have been a member of the church before he realizes that in keeping with the power of the covenant he is born again – long before he becomes aware of this. In fact, the promise of the covenant applies also to the children of believers, and therefore they are considered as members of the church, and outwardly are accepted as members by baptism. The 17<sup>th</sup> century sect of the Labadists has disappeared, but its concepts continue in many places.

However vigorously we must oppose both extremes, we need to recognize the value that exists in each. And whatever one advances against the idea of the state church pleads in favor for the good in Labadism; and whatever applies in the dispute with Labadism shows what is yet to be appreciated in the idea of a state church. On the one hand there must be evidence of the holiness of the church in the confession and walk of her members, and no one may be accepted as member except the one of whom it is expected that he is also sanctified internally. The church is the communion of saints. On the other hand the church cannot only judge what is inside of a person, for she needs to realize that there is chaff among the wheat; but she also must have the desire to bring all people under her influence so that Christ would sanctify them all. Thus the church must never adopt a tendency to become sectarian.

In this connection we think of the twofold command in connection with baptism. In Mark 16:16 we read: *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.* Here the demand of faith is required before baptism, and the holiness of the church is thus safeguarded. In Matthew 28:19 Christ 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.* He gives the command to cast the net of baptism as widely as possible among all the nations.

This twofold concept therefore must guide us: the holiness of the Lord's church and the extent of the covenant of grace. This is not an irreconcilable contrast, for a church that struggles for the holiness of her fellowship will exercise the greatest influence on the general population.

### *THE CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH*

In his letter to Smyrna Ignatius wrote: "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church." In fact, the church is where Christ is obeyed. The reality is that we can never speak about the catholicity of the church without being aware of the walls and towers of Rome, for the church of Rome confesses that she alone is the catholic or universal church and denies that any other church may lay claim to the name catholic.

Catholicity is an attribute that properly belongs to the church as the body of Christ. She has a place in the life of the whole earth and among all the nations, and must manifest herself there. Where the church and her institute or establishment closely correspond it must be required that she appear everywhere as the same organization. And thus we need not reproach the church of Rome that she demands unity in the appearance of the church among all nations. On the contrary we need to appreciate that also among the Protestant churches the impetus arose for international affiliation, and for experiencing such unity also beyond the national borders.

Nevertheless, with Roman Catholicism something entirely different is meant, namely the position of the power of the one office over the church of all the nations. That catholicity comes to expression in the submission of all nations to the power of the hierarchy that focuses itself in the power of the pope. What is really involved is the international dominant position of the church. And according to the Roman Catholic conception, the catholicity of the church cannot only be considered in such a way that she reveals her authority among all nations, but that she must control all expressions of life among those nations. Her scepter must govern all domains of science and art, politics and society, family and personal life, business and occupation. The crown of the mother church must shine everywhere. Her proclamations are authoritative not only for the limited area of church life, but also for every realm of national life. Such is the ideal of Catholicism.

Directly opposed to this is sectarianism. The characteristic of a sect is that it focuses exclusively on a single truth of Scripture and does not see the significance of the full truth of God for all of life. Every sect has its own truth: the Apostolics their apostolate, the Baptists their view of baptism, the Adventists their explanation of the prophecies, the Sabbatarians their view of the fourth commandment. One part of the truth always has their full attention while they neglect the rest, and thus they do not recognize the catholic character of the truth. It is for this reason also that the sect does not encourage its members to bear witness to the truth in every sphere of life, but advocates separation in a variety of ways as a shibboleth.

Also here we need to be aware of two ideas and discover their unity. Over against sectarianism we observe that the church is catholic. She has her place among the nations and must be planted there. Christ will not return until the gospel has come to all people and the church gathered out of all nations. He said: *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come* (Matt.24:14). In a certain way therefore the church controls the life of the nations and their future. And catholicity is not only to be understood that it must appear among all peoples, but also in such a way that it must exert its influence in every sphere of life. Christ said: *You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world* (Matt.5:13,14). If we were to exclude any area of this and say of it that the church must not make her influence felt there, we thereby contravene the catholicity of the church. And she must certainly avoid this sin.

However, over against Roman Catholicism we need to maintain that such influence of the church must be practiced spiritually. The church must never dominate through the power of the office. We must only speak of the sovereignty of

the Word. The staff of the King is the rod of His Word. There is a victory over the world other than by the means of force. And that is why for the church the way of conquest is the gathering of believers, not only through all sorts of organizations and societies, but also because she gives spiritual guidance in the behavior of every believer. The church must never seek to seize power the way the Roman church is guilty of this sin. And it is a sin, an offence that also in the Protestant churches has not been extinguished entirely. Thus her voice must not authoritatively determine the questions that lie outside of the ecclesiastical domain. She must not judge the political or social questions, nor the direction of the arts, nor the methods of science. She must carry out her calling in the service of the means of grace, in exercising discipline, and in demonstrating the mercy of Christ.

Whoever understands the relationship between the church as the body of Christ and her manifestation as church institute, knows that the difficulties in practical life are numerous; and also knows that the church easily goes too far in one direction or the other. Thus, when the church preaches the Word of God, should she be silent about questions that disturb life, and the answers to which can only be found with the light of God's Word? On the other hand, when she expresses her views, does she then not immediately make decisions about matters that are outside of her domain? She needs to keep in mind the cliffs and reefs of both Catholicism and sectarianism. And when the church proclaims the principles according to the Word of God, she may live in the assurance that by the Spirit of the Lord those principles will achieve spiritual power at the appointed time. Surely history proves that such is the case!

### *THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH*

We call the church Christian because all that she is, she is only through Christ. He is the One Who completes her in all things and in every respect. The church is His achievement. He Who owns all asks for her in whom He can pour out the fullness of His riches. The question arises: how is and how does Christ become all things for His church? Is He this only through the means of the office and the official service of the means of grace, or is He that directly, and the offices have only secondary and additional significance?

With respect to this matter we envision two views and need to draw two lines. On the one hand we see a line running from Christ via the offices and their functioning to the congregation. Yet on the other hand we observe a line from Christ directly to the congregation and then to the offices. Thus, we see the blessing of Christ come to the official administration of the means of grace, and from there to the congregation. But also, we observe that the action goes from Christ directly to the congregation, who actually themselves have the Word and have received the Spirit of the Lord to discern that Word, while the office is enlivened by the light that the congregation has. In one way we see the power of the office come directly from Christ with the result that the offices are beyond or greater than the congregation. In the other way the offices come out of the congregation and the office-bearers are given the authority by the congregation, but they remain the servants of the congregation.

The Roman church considers only the first view or line. But also among Protestantism the occurrence of clericalism, the domination of the offices may be found; and the illusion is encouraged that the congregation exists only by the grace of the office. The shepherd's staff is then transformed into a scepter, and the office surrounded with splendor and luster. Some speak of an aristocratic and a democratic principle in the realm of the church. And because the phenomena are different it is better not to employ these political terms; and yet there is in the realm of the church also at times a striving after absolutism, which surfaces regularly and prevails more easily when a congregation is not knowledgeable and less aware of the riches they possess in Christ.

The other view or line can only be found in independentism. According to their principle Christ leads and governs His church directly. The offices arise out of and from the congregation, and the office-bearers are only the executors of the desire and will of the congregation, and for her spiritual growth the church is not dependent on the official service. Some sects even reject the importance of the office entirely. This particular principle still functions in those churches however where they officially recognize yet the necessity of the office and its service.

Whoever examines Scripture with respect to this point discovers both positions. In those texts in which the office-bearers are considered as the representatives, the ambassadors of Christ, or those in which we read that the elders are overseers who must give an account of their oversight to Christ, we clearly discern the line from Christ via the office to the congregation. On the other hand it is evident from the earlier quotations that the other line from Christ via the

congregation to the office bearers is also clear: *As for you, the anointing you received from Him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you* (1John 2:27), and the body of Christ labors *to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up* (Eph.4:12). When it is meant in this way, namely for one's own building up through the means of the offices, the action does go out from the congregation itself.

Once again we observe that what has been said in favor of the first principle serves to challenge the second, and what has been presented in favor of the second serves to question the first. Both principles thus must be unilateral. And it does not help only to appeal to the one series of texts in order to disempower the other view. Church life will likely remain a continual encounter of action and reaction. Only in clearly distinguishing both positions and in searching for a balance between the meaning of the office and the congregation, the truth and the proper practice can be found.

That equilibrium certainly has not been discovered yet! We might be inclined to say that especially the second line that runs from Christ via the congregation to the offices of the Reformation has been lost sight of to a considerable degree. We would gladly see significance attached again to the office of believer. The church has suffered much from the office, and continues to do so. And in this also there is a tide of iniquity. But at the same time there are also harmful indications of independentism causing considerable fear for disintegration. The error in all this is that a balance is not being sought, or at least not in the proper manner. The confession that the church belongs to Christ includes also the prayer that He will continue to lead His church according to His promise.

### ***The Communion of Saints***

We believe *a holy, catholic, Christian church, the communion of saints*. With this we confess that for us the church through faith in Jesus Christ is the highest and all-embracing fellowship. We have that fellowship or communion in Jesus Christ through faith and hope and love. And thus we speak of our fellowship as church of Jesus Christ. With this of course is meant the communion of all believers here on earth, and thus the church as organism, as the body of Christ, to which all believers on earth belong and in whatever church or congregation they may assemble. This fellowship as church of the Lord extends far beyond the national borders. There is a fellowship of believers in the whole world, bought by Christ out of every race and people and language and nation.

This fellowship or communion that we have in Christ is of a different order than the national one; it exists behind every other fellowship on earth, behind our fellowship as state, as people, as group, as party, as society, as business, as family, and even behind our fellowship as church in the sense of organization or institute. Our eternal fellowship that we have through faith in Christ moves over all those boundaries and crosses them frequently. We maintain a national fellowship with those with whom we are not one in Christ, and we can and must retain that national relationship with them, even though because of Christ we are separated from them in our deepest heart and are opposed to them. The one does not need to exclude the other, if only we realize that all those other fellowships are of a different order than the eternal communion we have in Christ. We are able to respect the national and all the other relational fellowships in their relative value, while at the same time treasuring the communion in Christ as of a different and higher order, even when as they often do, those two cross each other's path and we have our internal conflicts.

We need to concentrate on that fellowship we have in Christ ever more intently, and for our faith it should emerge ever more vividly. However, because of this we must not forget those other fellowships. But when we hope and pray for a sense of the intensification of those fellowships, we need to hope even more for the strengthening of the awareness of our communion with Christ. For of all those other relationships Christ's word concerning the fragility of the things that pass away applies – but over against that, the unmovable nature of what we have in Christ is highlighted all the more sharply. We read: *I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away* (Matt.24:34,35). Our fellowship in Christ does not perish with all the created things on earth, but is preserved by the uncreated love of God in Christ.

In struggling for the relationships in human life as we work out what we confess, we need to long that the eternal fellowship we have in Christ may increase in importance for us, and that we by the Spirit may realize and experience this. Since we possess this fellowship by faith it also means that we always long for it, and have an aspiration that we come closer to each other as believers; that we know each other better, and that we are more involved in building up one

another's lives. Thus we confess this in answer 55: *that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.* With this we must also think of that fellowship in Christ in the broadest sense, and recognize it outside of the borders of our church. The church as world-church must hasten toward the future of Christ.

Everything that can be said of *the communion of saints* on earth is contained in this one concept: she is a communion of faith, and thus a fellowship that we have in faith and can only know and exercise by faith. That applies also to what is confessed in answer 55: *that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.* For surely communion or fellowship with Christ and with all His treasures and gifts exists only by faith. What we hear often is a call for greater communion and demonstration of love in the church of the Lord; but that takes place then by people, who if one should ask them personally whether by faith they share in Christ, often are unable to give a forthright answer. What is it then that we must give one another in the communion of saints? Surely not what we believe we possess of ourselves! For then however much good or love we would give each other, it would still be a communion according to the flesh. We would of course still be able to do much and be much for one another, but we would not build each other up in the fellowship of faith in Christ.

The exercise of *the communion of saints* is founded on something other than being fellow-humans. What we are for each other needs to be derived directly by faith, item by item, from Christ. And if we seek to be a blessing in that fellowship, we ourselves need to know on a daily basis the connection with Christ and also the outworking of that relationship by His Spirit and Word with respect to our own life. We can seek to distribute and pass on as spiritual treasures matters which have not by faith truly been derived from Christ. And we need to be rather careful with the things we want to use in developing the fellowship in the Lord's church. The apostle Paul writes that these things also will be tested: *If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward* (1Cor.3:12-14).

Much of the so-called spiritual work will be destroyed by fire. Only what we by faith directly derived from the fullness of Christ will last, and not what we with our own attitude and aptitude have produced. The only guarantee that we are truly building on that eternal fellowship which owes its existence to the uncreated love of God in Christ, is that we ourselves live close to Christ in that fellowship. If we were to ask ourselves seriously about what we have given to each other, and what we have been for one another, what of this do we know with certainty that we would find again eternally, and what would we then still retain? And yet it is this alone which is useful for that eternal fellowship. It is truly a communion by faith that derives all things from Christ, and in which Christ alone is important, and in which there are not found any so-called Christians.

There is yet another perspective to be considered. *The communion of saints* is a fellowship that we have only through faith and of which also only by faith we see Christ as Head. The question may be asked why it is necessary especially in this time that the spiritual fellowship needs to be strengthened? And the answer is that as with so many other relationships we are in danger of idolizing them. One could almost say that the idolization of organizations or fellowships is in the air. And that probably in a variety of ways. A person could even live an idolatrous life in his devotion and dedication to his own church. With all the temporary, compelling, and already disappearing fellowships the danger is at hand for idolatry.

We readily make something eternal of something temporal because the sense of adoration and worship is deeply imbedded in us. That danger is not there with the eternal communion we have in Christ, because we can see that fellowship only by faith, the faith by which we then at the same time see Christ as Head of the communion, and through which we then honor and worship God only in Christ. And it is then that the purpose for adoration and worship which God placed in us finds its proper objective. But how will we be preserved in the tide of idolatry that has always swept over the earth but certainly will increase in the future? Only when all our adoration in *the communion of saints* is for God in Christ. In this worship only our heart is free, while our life may be enslaved by every idolatrous service. Therefore the communion that we have in Christ must by God's grace fill our hearts more and more, for it is this that surpasses all other fellowships!

In the belief that this fellowship is with Christ, we see in the church in spite of all deficiencies still *the communion of saints*, the revelation of the body of Christ. We know full well that not all Israel is of Israel, and that there is chaff among the wheat. The church as body of Christ and her manifestation in the church as institute never coincide completely. There are believers also outside of the church, and there are members of the church as institute who are not members of Christ. We know these matters from the Word of God and our practical church life confirms this. Nevertheless, we must not continue to calculate and count in this way. When we view matters by faith, we still see a revelation of the body of Christ in the church as institute and we consider each other as members of Christ.

In that fellowship we do not ask: how much are you worth in the world, and how much do you have in your bank account or stashed away in your safe, or how important a figure are you in society? But we greet each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. And the question of what a person is worth must be asked in this way: what does a person contribute to the fellowship with God in Christ and of what usefulness is he for that communion? But who has the criterion to be able to judge that? Our lack of fellowship can for the most part be explained from not keeping this law of Christ: *in humility consider others better than yourselves* (Phil.2:3).

The problem frequently is that we do not see the church by faith – not ourselves nor each other. For when we see life by faith, we see Christ and the preeminence of His grace, whereby we are nothing and in view of which everyone can only confess his unworthiness. However, we almost always refuse to look at matters by faith in Christ, and thus we tend to make this communion a secularly human fellowship, and we evaluate and appraise each other. What happens then is that we form a judgment with respect to each other and thus we can no longer serve each other. For if we wish to serve one another we must first of all personally occupy the lowest place! That means surrendering our heart to the communion of love the Spirit creates.

### ***The Forgiveness of Sins***

In almost every division of the catechism the forgiveness of sins makes its appearance. The question then is how and in what context it appears there. We cannot understand that if we do not confess the work of God in His church with contemplation and adoration. When we are able to see the church by faith, then we see there the same faith that involves us in God's work in the church. We can never see that in the abstract. I am involved and affected by that work of God in the church, or I am not. In fact, the confession of the church and the confession about me are one. And thus if we see the result of God's gathering work in His church on earth to which we belong, it is a comfort and assurance to believe that we share in the blessing of the church.

Of course related to this is also the responsibility that we are to commit ourselves to Christ and to His church – His church in which I possess all things in Christ. But then we may also claim and confess *the forgiveness of sins*. For this is an action of the Holy Spirit that He works in us in the communion of the church. What is involved here is not the forgiveness of sins as they appear before the face of God. But what is involved here is that forgiveness of sins as we are conscious of this, and are free from it and comforted through it, not because of the peace we have with God, but because of the peace in our heart. That is then a work of the Holy Spirit, of the Comforter Who has been sent for this purpose by Christ, and Who makes us realize things that we do not see. In the fellowship of the church we see ourselves in all our sinful inclinations and actions, and thus burdened with guilt.

But the Holy Spirit enables us to view ourselves free from guilt, and maintains His testimony over against the accusations of our conscience, so that we finally witness that *the Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ* (Rom.8:16,17). But the Holy Spirit does that work in us in the fellowship of the church! The Spirit of the Lord wants a people who exult in liberty, and in communion with those people I must exult! In response to their prayers He sets all Israel free from unrighteousness – and He does that also to me!

However, there are also pilfered gifts. In fact, these often appear when people speak of *the forgiveness of sins* when they have not followed the path of obedience by remaining with the fellowship of the church. The Spirit surely works in us when we in obedience to God's Word faithfully seek the communion of the church. For in that fellowship with our brothers and sisters the ties that bound us in the administration of the Word and of baptism and the Lord's Supper are then

undone. The Spirit teaches us through the Word that He forms a communion that is truly free from sin, and He enables us to be active members in the liberated fellowship.

Thus we *as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts*, and therefore also in *the forgiveness of sins*. Yet there are so many people who pursue all kinds of things, also in spiritual matters, looking everywhere in the world searching for rest for their consciences. When we bow our heads under the yoke of Christ and are not too big to belong to that communion with all our heart, we are set free in it by the Spirit. We need to belong to the church with our heart. That means then that to be member of the church is always a yielding to the communion of love which the Spirit works there. And it also means that as we share in these created things we share at the same time in the uncreated love of God in Christ. In that way the Spirit sets us free from our sins.

Our rejoicing in the liberty of this communion that we have here in the church is not an idolatrous boasting in things that pass away, but it is through the Spirit a glorying in Christ as the Head, Who in His church supplies everything and in every respect. Thus we read that *God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way* (Eph.1:22,23). And with this we maintain the principle of the restoration by the Spirit. That is the dynamic force in the history of the world that necessarily leads to the crisis at the resurrection of the dead and the creation of the glory of the eternal life. We shall be ever so grateful that we are included in that movement of the Spirit toward the crisis of the last days.

**THE TRUE FAITH****S. G. De Graaf**

Translation by Richard Stienstra

**Lord's Day 22****57. What comfort does the resurrection of the body offer you?**

*Not only shall my soul after this life immediately be taken up to Christ, my Head, but also this my flesh, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul and made like Christ's glorious body.*

**58. What comfort do you receive from the article about the life everlasting?**

*Since I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, I shall after this life possess perfect blessedness, such as no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived – a blessedness in which to praise God forever.*

***The Holy Spirit's Work in the Ensuing Outcome of Our Life on Earth***

The confession of the work of the Holy Spirit as begun in LD 21 is continued and concluded in LD 22. However, the activity of Holy Spirit has its own character here: it concerns what He will do with respect to the end result of our life on earth. The Spirit is the Spirit of fellowship. It was that communion of the Spirit in our life on earth that we confessed in LD 21. Through that fellowship He gathered us to be the church of the Lord Jesus Christ; He also maintains us in this, gives us the communion of saints, and comforts us with the forgiveness of sins. The confession now follows the same trend, and at the end of our life on earth He does not let go of His work, but He completes it. This is what we confess here. We add to this that we also receive some insight from God about what the Spirit will do afterward.

That we are able to know something about that future is evidence of His grace for us. Scripture places all emphasis on our fellowship with the Lord in this life. And that communion is ample consolation for us. Especially because the Lord gives us that fellowship so abundantly, He could have demanded that we should have full confidence in Him even without any revelation about it and leave the future entirely in His hands. Such a demand would not have been too onerous. It is therefore evidence of His gracious love that He not only gives the blessing of His fellowship in this present life, but also with respect to our future does not leave us completely in the dark.

Those last words need to be understood just as they are written, namely, He does not leave us completely in the dark "with respect to our future." We are able to raise numerous questions about that future which remain unanswered. When we examine the Scriptures and also our Lord's Day with a certain feeling of curiosity concerning the future life with the intent to learn all sorts of things, we generally end up being disappointed. That tendency becomes clearly evident in the special intensity with which many in our time have thrown themselves into an exploration of the future life. This is true particularly with respect to the occult sciences and also of parapsychology that seeks to be known as a serious scientific pursuit.

That these phenomena exist and ardently emerge again in every century certainly proves that there is some consciousness in man about the future life. And this sense is of considerable value also since it proves that there is a relationship between the present and the future life and a measure of incursion of the future into this life. If this were not so, mankind would not have any awareness of it at all. However, what is true already for this life, namely that we cannot understand its full meaning outside of the light of Scripture, is to a much greater degree true for the future. What could we know about it, what conception could we possibly form, and what hope could we have in it without God's revelation in His Word? Without that Word it would only be a fantasy, an elusive searching and probing. We have certainty only through faith in the works of God's hands, in what He has done and will do in this life and in the next. Our faith can only focus

on His revelation. If already with respect to the present phenomena and their meaning and significance we walk by faith and not by sight, how much more so then for the future!

Scripture does not give us an answer to all kinds of questions, but it does provide us with enough light so that we can cling to a certain promise. Moreover, it is God's demand that we trust Him also in what we do not know. And for whom the revelation of Scripture has opened up in all of its glory, it is not strange that God reveals but little of the life that is to come. Moreover, for that person the manner in which He does this is not so strange either, for Scripture constantly conveys to us that we should pay our undivided attention to this present life – that our hearts should be devoted to communion with the Lord Whom we find and expect to find here. And in that fellowship we shall leave the future with Him.

One may surmise that always asking about the future suggests some indication that we do not experience what He certainly wishes to give. The emphasis must surely fall on our life with Him through the Spirit. This Lord's Day continues the thought of the previous one, where the subject was the present-day work of the Spirit, the blessings of redemption far beyond what we hoped or prayed for, while what is envisioned now is the promise of complete blessedness that is yet to come. The principle of that eternal joy is felt in our hearts already now. And the starting-point cannot be any other than what we by faith possess here in God's grace.

In this life we have to make our calling and election sure so that we do not falter and reject our fellowship with the Lord. And thus every day we should be focused on that so that our future will be secure. The apostle Peter wrote: *Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (2 Pet.1:10, 11). In the totality of God's revelation it becomes clear for us that we can never know about our future except in connection with what we possess now in communion with the Lord.

The future is the result of our walk on earth, the achievement of our life in time, the crowning reward of the struggle of faith. How can we cherish any hope for the future if we have doubts about the fellowship with God in this life? What can we envision of what is yet to come, if we do not see its beginnings here? Prophecy always proceeds from what is here, from what God does here and now – for He is the God Who works! – and continues this process into the distant horizon. Only in that light do we see the light!

Our faith sees God now in the works of His hands, in our time as well as in the future. And thus in that seeing of God, the Word of the Spirit generates faith. Therefore faith understands that the most important thing we can say about the future here on earth, is that the communion with God there will be experienced in a much more intimate manner than was ever possible here on earth. The apostle Paul expressed it this way: *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* (1Cor.13:12). In this Lord's Day that is really the most important thing. And that is the reason Scripture speaks about these matters in the way it does. It stirs in us the longing for that coming future, but then a longing for the more intense communion with God, the fellowship in which He receives all the honor and glory that is due to Him. That seeing God *face to face* is what we are made eager for by the Scriptures, and that is what the Spirit teaches us. The fellowship with God in the present as well as in the future is so central in Scripture that all changes in the manner of existence of the world and of ourselves that will come some day, are connected with and will be the result of the so much more intimate fellowship with God that we shall enjoy then.

Even as this whole world in its nature and intent is controlled by the fellowship with God that is to be found here on earth, the future world also will receive its imprint of the even more intense fellowship in which the redeemed humanity will share. Therefore Scripture points us especially to that future fellowship, and is yet very sparse in shedding light on the question of what our future life will be like specifically. We must not be distracted by the brilliance and luster of the future life and our existence in it from Him Who is, here as well as there, the central focus and Who Himself is always our greatest source of pleasure.

We would not be able to cope with a complete display of the glory of the future events here on earth. For we would so easily be drawn away from the love of God. Already in that little Scripture reveals about the city with the gates of pearls and the streets of gold such a danger is contained. There is nothing in the revelation of God's glory that does not also

contain a temptation for us. When we cultivate our sinful flesh in the contemplation of future things, we will not escape this danger. Therefore we need to be thankful that Scripture speaks in the way it does! For what it is all about, also in this, is God and His fellowship – as is always the case.

### ***No Misleading Contrasts***

It is certainly clear that we are able to approach the content of this Lord's Day only from and in faith. And in doing so we are first and foremost focused on God and His fellowship. Especially from this perspective of faith it becomes apparent to us that there is great significance in God's revelation about the life of the world to come, even without the specifics. And through that revelation we will begin to see the relative and temporary nature of this present world. Here on earth we experience marvelous and radical things, but the force and the fame of these happenings that assume such immense proportions in our awareness are nevertheless relative.

What are they really in comparison with the exalted nature of those things that will remain forever? And when we see the present events as of all-surpassing significance we have already sinned in doing so, for we have not seen them then in their dependence on and relationship to God, Who in addition to this present world has made and prepared another world. Although He reveals something of His majesty in the marvels and miracles of these earthly matters, what He some day will display of His majesty far exceeds everything that may produce in us the deepest emotions here below. Through the expectations that we have of the future, we also rise above this present life in the sense that through this we are preserved from being completely wrapped up in the affairs of this present world, and thus might perish with it.

At the same time all of this indicates that there is some relationship between this world and the next, also in our experiences. In fact, it is not only that we know something of it, but also that we experience some of this. In this life we are able to reach out in anticipation to something of the next life, as the catechism states: *I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy.* What is described here is what we love to call a foretaste of the eternal blessing, and what Scripture designates as *the peace of God, which transcends all understanding* (Phil.4:7). This refers of course to our present understanding that is caught up in this world. There is no true knowledge by faith of the future life without us also through faith enjoying it. Thus faith that includes hope brings the future matters nearby. But then we must also continually remind ourselves that this is the enjoyment of future things, and therefore now already an enjoyment for God's sake because we see the glory of His fellowship reflected in the things He will bring about. This is the link between the present and the future, and in this the same God is present Whose communion we enjoy now already, but one day in a much more glorious sense.

Thus the same God is present, and our hope rests in Him. Our faith also with respect to these things is our faith in God. Scripture has numerous illustrations of this, but there is one pericope that sheds further light on the above. It is found in Matthew 22: 23-33, where the Sadducees present Jesus with an imaginary problem seeking to trap Him and to ridicule the belief in the teaching of the resurrection of the dead. They invoke the law of Moses, and come up with the story of the seven brothers who had married the same woman but had no children with her. So they ask Jesus: *Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?* Jesus' answer is of such a nature that the entire pseudo-serious problem collapses: *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.* The Sadducees evidently do not understand ***the power of God*** by which He can call a world into being and maintain it in an entirely different manner with different methods than the world in which we now live.

Jesus then proceeds to expose their shameful scheme, and quotes an episode from Scripture that so infallibly and so effectively addressed the patriarchs, and that still speaks to their descendants: *But about the resurrection of the dead--have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?' He is not the God of the dead but of the living.* When Jesus uses the passage from Exodus 3: 6, where God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, He chooses a text that we would never have selected to prove the resurrection of the dead with certainty. But it is all the more evidence that Christ alone is able to unlock for us the treasures of the Scriptures. Apparently the words Jesus quoted in order to prove the resurrection of the dead mean more than we understand from the fact that God is the God whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipped and served.

In order to understand that deeper view, we need to consider the time when God established His covenant with Abraham. We read in the passage: *I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you* (Gen.17:7). When God refers to Himself as *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*, then that Self-designation of God always looks back at *this* declaration, and it is the expression of the covenant relationship in which these patriarchs by virtue of His sovereign calling and election related to Him. In this Self-designation God summarizes the entire covenant and the benefits of it in Himself – for it all is determined in Him, comes forth from His fullness, becomes their part in fellowship with Him, and receives its completion in the perfection of that fellowship.

Therefore since this covenant is more than an agreement or a contract, since it is the most intimate fellowship and communion, the covenant is only conceivable between two parties. Should one of the parties fall away, the fellowship is broken. The Lord would have discontinued being the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob if they had ceased to exist with their death. Thus when centuries after their death at His appearance to Moses He still calls Himself their God, it follows from this that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still lived: *He is not the God of the dead but of the living* (Matt.22:32). In God's Name is found the condemnation of the heresy of the Sadducees, which conflicts with the basic elements of God's revelation!

From this use of Scripture with which Christ sets the Sadducees straight, it is also clear how God receives His people in the fellowship of His covenant and how He shares His blessing with them. That is, His unchangeable love, the love of His intention, embraced them in their entire being, in their whole person, as people of both body and soul. Was not Abraham called in his whole person? Was not the circumcision that they received in their bodies, God's eloquent witness of that calling and disposition? In this way as a whole person in body and soul God accepts them as His: in the entire journey that they traveled on earth, both as they would lie on their deathbed at the end of it, as well as when they would be in the state of death, when *the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it* (Eccl.12:7).

Moreover, the promise of their resurrection to glory and *the life everlasting* is raised high above their graves because of the Name with which God in sovereign love bound Himself to them, the covenant Name: Yahweh, I Am Who I Am, and I will be Who I will be, the Faithful One, the God Who cannot lie. When Peter later speaks of Jesus' exaltation especially in connection with this promise, he calls God *the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers,[Who] has glorified His servant Jesus* (Acts 3: 13).

Believing *the resurrection of the body* is based fundamentally on the Self-designation of God. But then also in such a way that we believe in that God Who in His covenant accepts us as a whole person, and Who faithfully maintains us in this until all eternity. Every difference of opinion in which this all-inclusive nature of God's works is not envisioned fails to do justice to God's faithfulness, and therefore must be completely rejected. Also in this part of our confession the focus is on the LORD our God.

We need to consider here the point of view often made that between what now is and what one day will come, between life now and the life hereafter, there is no relationship but being only a stark contrast. Those who propound that view preferably make use of the terms natural and spiritual. The "natural" is then applied to the present time, and the "spiritual" to the future, and then in such a way that between the two there is no similarity. After all, there is only disparity between time and eternity, they say. And yet in all of this they fall far short of doing justice to the fullness of redemption in Christ Jesus. The apostle Paul writes that God *seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come* (Eph.1:20,21). Thus when they give to this coming age the meaning of the future yet to come, they do an injustice to the force of the words and reach the disastrous difference mentioned above.

Yet as we noted in a different place, "The coming age, however, is not purely future; it does not only follow this age but is also above it, ready to be revealed at any moment. In a certain sense that coming age has already become the present. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the new and eternal testament really has begun; no third dispensation of the covenant is to follow upon the present one....The coming age has thus already begun, but we are still awaiting the revelation of its glory." (Promise and Deliverance IV,263). Evidently the age to come envisions the future as well as the

present. While it is not yet fully present, its future presence may be recognized in many ways. Thus this language of Scripture is totally different than the disparity of time and eternity.

Eternal life already exists now. The coming age is the time that is now actively being fulfilled, for does not Scripture say that God is busy making all things new? *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day* (2Cor.4:16).

With respect to the words “natural” and “spiritual” Scripture indeed shows that there is a difference between this life and the future. But one cannot relate this to the idea of a complete contrast between time and eternity! For in such a distinction one begins to forfeit God’s faithfulness to His work. And by placing all emphasis on the difference between this and the future life, Scripture points us to God’s faithfulness as certainty. We read in 1 Corinthians 15 that at this time we have the natural life (it actually says psychical), and after this time we will have the spiritual life. The apostle Paul notes: *The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual* (1Cor.15:46).

The peculiarity of the natural life is that it has temptation in it, and that in it the decision must be made even as that once needed to be made by Adam, and later was made by Christ. But in the future spiritual life the temptation and the decision are finished, and there is constant and undisputed sharing in the fellowship with God. And to this measure we already now have the eternal and future life, namely that by faith we may live out of the decision once made for us by Christ – no matter how many temptations we still suffer here, and no matter how many decisions we still have to make. At present we still face the battle, but at the same time we rest in the finished work of Christ. In that sense especially we anticipate the future life, not only in our knowledge, but also in our living and experience. And that anticipating of those future things is necessary – that immensely astonishing reality that the decision has been made for us, and that there is for us an eternal fellowship with God which does not allow any encroachment – so that we may perceive the tremendous things of this time in their relative value. Fortunately, all that disturbs us here so much is marked, limited, and made relative by what Scripture reveals concerning those eternal, immovable things, which in their immovability are a perfect revelation of God’s unchangeable covenant of grace.

When we say that these temporal things have a relative importance, it does not mean that they are without value. However these temporal things are a reference to, a preparation for, and a first phase of the eternal future things. There is no other way to the future than through the temporal, and then in such a way that we take these temporal things fully seriously. Scripture observes: *If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body* (1Cor.15:44). Thus Scripture also recognizes this natural life for its own value and importance, even if these temporal things always call for those that remain forever. For Scripture means that when there is a natural life, there is also a spiritual life which is the fulfillment of and connection with this natural life. This natural life with its valuable treasures one day will become the spiritual life. And even though by faith we are able to anticipate the glorified life, we cannot reach beyond our natural life as if we should want to skip it or consider it not worthy to be lived.

Primarily in this time we need to meet God and discover His fellowship in the things of this natural life. Thus we must meet Him in our eating and drinking, in our family relations, in our enjoyment of love and beauty, in all our sentiments, in our thinking as we are doing this right now. We meet Him in believing in this time that is temporal, in God’s Word in the format it is given in now, and in so much more – all of it belongs to and constitutes our temporal life. And whoever does not encounter God here, will not find Him when he meets God in the eternal spiritual life. Also with respect to our faith we cannot pass over this natural life. Our faith needs to be busy with it and particularly to discover God in this life.

Finally, when we in close association with the first answer confess that *not only shall my soul after this life immediately be taken up to Christ, my Head, but also this my flesh, raised by the power of Christ*, we must not make the distinction that our soul belongs to the eternal and future life, while our body to the temporal present life. For also our body will one day be raised up and shine in eternal splendor. Seen in this way, our body also belongs to the eternal and unchangeable. If some would respond to this by suggesting that the body will be greatly changed, our answer must be, that precisely the same is true for our soul which surely is greatly changed as it enters into eternal life.

We may not divide a person into an eternal indestructible component, his soul, and a temporal perishable one, his body. Soul and body both pass through this temporal natural life to everlasting spiritual life. Thus my soul, seen in this way, is my life as I have lived that in this time and still live it. Our life lived in this present time resumes through God’s power

and by His sustaining hand, also after this life in eternity. But it surely will have changed much then by God's grace and Spirit! Nevertheless, we need to be on our guard against every spurious contrast that would fix our hope on what is found in creation, as if this could ever be our security! Moreover, it would distract us from the faithfulness of God, Who through His Spirit will complete the work of sanctification. We confess the Spirit of Christ, for we know Him.

### ***From Preparation to Completion***

The taking up of our soul to Christ its Head, the raising of our body, and the creation of the glory of eternal life are the climax of the Holy Spirit's work of His restoration of the whole creation, with the restoration of man as its central focus. For it is all about man among everything that is created, about the relationship that God wants to have with man in glory, for which all creation serves and in which it is glorified. And at the same time in man it is about all creation that in the glorified man reaches its purpose.

That is the pinnacle of the Holy Spirit's work toward which all that He did before was directed. That achievement is however the completion of His work of sanctification that He is doing right now. There is thus an impelling drive toward the fulfillment of the work of the Spirit. History moves forward with dazzling speed, and the heavens one day will disappear with a roar because they understand that speed. In this respect a thousand years are with the Lord like one day, so speedily are they past. But also as the Lord by His Spirit accomplishes yet such great and awesome things, one day is like a thousand years. The apostle Peter writes: *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare* (2Pet.3:8-10).

It is in this way that in the work of sanctification is carried out. That is, the work of the redemption of all creation through the Spirit of redemption, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer. This Spirit renews life, first in man, in those who are His. Our confession of the work of the Spirit has therefore also always a personal character.

*Not only shall my soul after this life immediately be taken up to Christ, my Head, but also this my flesh, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul.* The Spirit of Jesus Christ recreates the new fellowship in the church as the body of Christ, but then in that fellowship every individual life has its significance. Apart from that fellowship we mean nothing. And it is in this vein that the apostle Paul writes: *God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"* (1Cor.12:18-21). We people are nothing of ourselves, and we always need to consider ourselves as members of the body of Christ. But then in it each of us has his own importance and the Holy Spirit guides each of us in His own ways.

Particularly in the New Testament there is much to read about the importance of each individual life in the fellowship. In Christ's parables in Luke 15 we read how the shepherd goes out to search for the one lost sheep. He finds it and brings it back to the flock. With the lost son a special love and grace are evident as he returns and is restored to the father's house. There is thus a very special leading of the Holy Spirit for every one of us because each has importance in the sight of God.

We reflect much about the special ways of the Spirit of Christ with us, but it is difficult for us to speak about it. And for every one of us the conclusion should be: What a fool I have been and still am! I have been a wandering and headstrong sheep that always walks past the door of the sheepfold. We humans frequently make light of the work of the Spirit, and time and again find our own life interesting, and not the work of the Spirit. And thus we need to be careful in speaking about the ways of the Spirit in our inner life.

But our faith must speak about what we confess here namely that *my soul after this life immediately [is] taken up to Christ, my Head.* The soul is not something in abstraction as this is understood among the pagans, and regretfully also is asserted by many Christians and comes out in expressions such as this: "If only in due time my soul is saved." And we ask ourselves, what is that soul that is to continue its existence?

As unlikely as it is that a person can come to understand himself fully if he has not first come to God in Christ, so unlikely is it that there is any certainty in the conception about eternal life. However when we by faith in Christ have come to the knowledge of ourselves and to the purpose of our existence, we perceive that this purpose consists in belonging to Christ, and in Him to God. Then we know that there is something in us that cannot die, namely the bond of life with Christ, and we know therefore also what eternal life must contain for us. Thus it is also clear what *after this life immediately* means, for it is not really acceptable that we first of all would have to face a period of unconsciousness until the day of Christ's return. Life finds its distinctive characteristic in the heart, for according to Scripture *it is the wellspring of life* (Prov.4:23), and it has its fellowship with Christ in the spirit, through which the direction of our life is determined.

Even though our heart and our spirit function in combination with the body, we could never consider that the working of our heart and of our spirit are totally dependent on it. We believe that according to Scripture we, once deprived of the body, will have that inward life turned to Christ in which we will enjoy complete salvation. Also the comfort of this faith is again dependent on that fellowship that we now have with Christ. Whoever by faith experiences that relationship with Christ, knows that this fellowship still can be resisted and contested, but in essence it is indestructible and once will be enjoyed in undisturbed blessedness.

In this way all sterility vanishes from the word *soul*. Our soul, that is, the full activity of our heart and of our spirit – in one word: our life in the way we have become first truly conscious of it in Christ. And thus it is our life as this has been led by the Holy Spirit, redeemed and fulfilled, our life with all its content, with everything we have done and experienced in it, with all that the Holy Spirit has accomplished in it. Our soul is our living life itself. Scripture states: *Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits* (Ps.103:1,2). Thus it speaks of the soul as being all that is within me, that life with all its emotions, all its sorrows and joys, its depths and its ecstasies, its adoration and happiness, its deeds, its successes and disappointments, all it received and gave away – all that together is our soul.

It is that life, that soul which *after this life immediately is taken up to Christ, my Head*. And it does not take place without that life having been prepared for it from the beginning and especially since its conversion by the Holy Spirit. Thus even from the start, and also before the conversion. In fact, the Holy Spirit was preparing the life in the womb, and He gave it that history in life, continued to guide it so that it would eternally have the place with Christ that has been prepared for it. We must never separate the end of our life from its history. By faith we can testify nothing of that end unless we believe that our life is now being controlled and guided by the Spirit of Christ for redemption and forgiveness of sin. There is no end of one's life that is indecisive and just happens, but there is only the completion of it through the Holy Spirit.

Thus we confess this activity of the Holy Spirit with *my soul* as the work of final completion. We confess that it *immediately is taken up to Christ, my Head* for the closest possible fellowship with Him. For this purpose our soul is separated from the body and taken up from this world to enter the blessed fellowship with Christ in heaven.

We earnestly need to pray to the Lord for that work of His through the Spirit. The words of the Psalmist come to mind: *How precious to me are Your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!* (Ps.139:17). The formation of life in this body was already a miracle. But then this life was bound to the body and therein it existed and lived, and without this body it seemed unthinkable. And then God performs this strange, this abnormal marvel, that He extracts this life, withdrawing it from the body, maintaining it separately by the power of His Spirit and enabling it to continue to exist. And that is the anomaly: our life is able to continue its existence outside of the body. It is that miracle we confess with adoration!

Moreover, God makes our soul and life continue with all the results that He by His grace worked in it, and thus makes it enter the most intimate blessed fellowship with Christ. It is in this way that our life becomes temporarily hidden in Christ during its separate existence. We can consider this only with adoration, for it is not that our soul, our life, would not know anything, but it will have a conscious, blessed fellowship with Christ. Thus Christ said to the murderer on the cross: *I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise* (Luke 23:43), with which He expressed that same miracle. Paul wrote: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean*

*fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far* (Phil.1:21-23). The apostle in stating his preference saw and understood the wonder.

We can only speak about this with the deepest feeling of emotions. God cares for our life while we are here in the body; but then He continues His providing care for us in a special way when He removes it from the body and makes it enjoy blessings of which it could not possibly dream while still in this body. This then is the work of the Spirit of the Redeemer Who even when a parting comes through death, through that departure continues His work of redemption and completes it. For we know that this is not the conclusion of the Spirit's activity. He will bring an end to that abnormal situation where that life apart from the body continues its existence, and restore the life to the body. But what we have gained in terms of the intimate fellowship with Christ, we will never lose. That fellowship with Christ continues even though our life will once again function in the body.

Our life, our soul, is being prepared by the Holy Spirit in this present time for the purpose of the most intimate fellowship with Christ. All that is lacking is the completion. How could we ever by faith have been able to understand this, or how could we ever have hoped for it, if we had not learned through the Spirit to thirst for that communion with Christ if He already now had not become the most loved One of our lives? We are busy in our life and are burdened with many cares, but how does all of that help us? This is the purpose to which the Spirit leads us by all those roads, in order that we may grow in love for Christ so that this life becomes one appeal for His fellowship and the opening up of His heart. For then we can truly speak of our dying as a completion.

It is now almost superfluous to say that such being taken up to Christ will mean an immediate and complete sanctification. We do not confess a purgatory as if our sins would need to be burned off first. But we still have some difficulty with that confession of being completely purified in one moment, when we see that with our last breath the sins remain an intertwined part of our thoughts and desires. After all, what do we really know about the sanctifying of our lives? And yet through faith that full sanctification needs to come ever closer. That is also possible, for we are able to see that the bond with sin is broken through the sorrow for it and by our confession of guilt. Then the cords are broken and there is sanctification. The Spirit gives us His power for self-control in God's Name. Also the miracle of complete cleansing or sanctifying does not merely happen overnight, for the Spirit over the years has prepared us for this, and also this activity is completion of what He began to do here.

A place in heaven! We can hardly imagine that, unless we remember that the place in heaven is that of God's love in Christ. Then we understand what Christ said: *In My Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you* (John 14:2). The meaning is that He went to prepare a place for us in the love of God, for everyone has his own place there, for *in My Father's house are many rooms*. Of course heaven is very desirable, and we shall see it: that space in heaven takes in also the earth. Our soul therefore already now longs for and knows something of that place of God's love and desires to enter it. Thus also this work of the Spirit is completion.

Yet this is the unusual feature that God withdraws our life from the body and has it continue on its own. That being taken up of our soul however is of a temporary nature. Scripture especially pictures the whole of God's works as a unity, and thus our life in this body in relationship with this world of which we are the head. When on this earth a life is taken away from the body and out of the fellowship of this world it is abnormal: this disappearing from here where we belonged and making an entry into the realm of the dead. With this realm of the dead we do not think of a specific place, for the fact is that believers will *immediately be taken to Christ* while unbelievers will be under judgment. When we enter the realm of the dead we understand by it that they who die belong to the dead and are no longer in the land of the living. And envisioning it in this way we understand the Scriptural concept properly.

And still, to belong no more to the land of the living is a loss of life. That is why death is and remains a terror, and it is *the last enemy to be destroyed* (1Cor.15:26). This does not contradict what Paul wrote elsewhere: *I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far* (Phil.1:23), nor what he exclaimed when he wrote: *Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (Rom.7:24). Because to live in this present body means to live in the midst of sin, he longed for that termination and so do we, that is, the longing to be delivered from sin. It is in this way that we long to be away from the body and to be with the Lord. But only in this sense! To see it from another perspective means that when we keep our eye fixed on the unity of our life in the body, we heartily concur with Paul in that other expressed wish: *For while we are*

*in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life (2 Cor.5:4).*

Therefore this abnormal situation, that life exists outside of the body, must end and there must be a *resurrection of the body*. That does not just mean, of course, that this matter, this material that constitutes my body will be recreated, but it means much more. This life that I have lived here in this present body will again be manifested in that new one and in all the relationships that I will then have through it. In death my life is hidden in Christ, and the result of this will only first be revealed in the resurrection of the dead. Scripture observes: *When Christ, Who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory (Col.3:4)*. Then all that we have been in this life will become evident – all that we have been in this life through the Lord and for the Lord. Our life in the body is not futile. This life comes back and we will see it again, even though it is purified and glorified. It returns in its results which can only be those of faith. In the resurrection of our body there is an escape from the realm of the dead that we entered when we died. And in that resurrection there will be an exaltation of our salvation through which then the inner life with Christ will be turned outward, and all relations with the then purified and renewed world will be restored. With those renewed abilities we will be able to serve God.

In the spirit of the Apostles Creed the catechism limits itself to the resurrection of the believers. Of course also the unbelievers will be resurrected, but for them it will not mean an escape from the realm of the dead, the domain of oblivion. Their resurrection will be to eternal horror and the intensification of condemnation. When they have been resurrected and the mouth of the abyss has been closed over them, they will have been assigned to the land of oblivion for ever. We read in Scripture that *the wicked will not inhabit the earth (Prov.10:30 NKJ)*.

Thus the resurrection of the dead will also be the completion of the work that the Spirit began to do here, for there we shall experience the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit in this body. But we are not able to say much about what that future body will be like. If we should wish to depict it in terms of our present time, the apostle Paul would say to us: *How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as He has determined, and to each kind of seed He gives its own body (1Cor.15: 36-38)*. For just as the ear of wheat that grows from the kernel differs in glory from that seed, so also our new body will differ in glory from the present one.

We only know that *we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ Who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body (Phil.3:20,21)*. And we shall see Him as He is because just as He was raised to glory, we shall also be raised. Only then the full meaning of the fact that He is our Head shall become clear to us. And then we shall never again lose sight of Him as man, something that we only too readily do on this earth. Even as the fruit of His life is revealed in His glorified body, that fruit of His life will also be revealed in our glorified body.

Then the glory of *life everlasting* will begin. We must not forget that eternal life begins already now through the Spirit and in faith, for this starts with believing and regeneration. And already here is opened for us a heaven-high and a world-wide fellowship. Through the Spirit we truly have received living space. Then the Spirit will also recreate heaven and earth and provide a new revelation of the glory of God in all of creation that no man is able to foresee. And even though none of us is able to have any idea in what circumstances that will take place, yet the Word of God will be fulfilled: *He Who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Rev.21:5)*. However the reality of it, namely the experiencing of God's fellowship in everything, we know from our life here in time. It is in this way that we look forward to eternal life being filled with joy, for that will be the restoration of all things by God's grace.

At first we find the idea of eternal life rather unreal and incredible, but by faith we turn things around and now we see how unreal the things here appear to be, that is, the world that we often find so actual and authentic since we can see and feel the things here. We are then going to be able to see how much pretense and deception there is in it. But one day the whole truth will be evident, when the world once again responds to its purpose, namely to be a revelation of God and of the fellowship that He in His Son wants to maintain with His own.

Once it will again be apparent for us that in all things we may see God, and that the things that were closed to us because of the curse that was on them, but also because of our perspective of unbelief, will be lifted and removed. Surely there

will then not be anything at all in which we will not be able to see our God! And to be able to see Him is to serve Him, for then we see Him Whom we have loved all our life. To put it differently: in God's creation the fountains will flow, and it will not be a veiled but an unveiled revelation of the glory of God in all creation. And our soul will have space that is unbounded.